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THE ACTRESS

ISABELLE HUPPERT

as GARBO

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Frank Sinatra and Lauren Bacall at Musso and Frank Grill, Hollywood, 1957.
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ONE FOR THE ROAD

"You can sit in the exact same booth where Greta Garbo and Gary Cooper used to have breakfast together. You can hang by the bar where Lauren Bacall used to drink her martinis. Every day I sit down at the same desk that my great grandfather worked from."

MARK ECHEVERRIA, OWNER OF MUSSO & FRANK

BY TONJE KRISTIANSEN

—In a city where selling out is an art, it was never more beautiful than in the back room of Musso & Franks. Since 1919, literary giants have been drinking to forget that they traded their Nobel Prizes for the beautifully stained business of writing for the movies. From Fitzgerald trying to put his oeuvre into the confines of Courier 12-point screenwriting format with the lubricating help of a mint julep to Bukowski growling inaudibly to Blake Carrington from *Dynasty* while sipping dry martinis laced with A1 steak sauce. In the knowledge that discretion was upheld more vigorously than any members' club, deals, careers and mistakes were made and unmade over the course of a night. And they still are. Tonje Kristiansen talks to fourth-generation owner Mark Echeverria about this remnant from the golden age of Hollywood and the stars who made it their home.

Tonje Kristiansen: Gore Vidal described Musso's like, "Stepping into a warm bath". **Mark Echeverria:** Gore Vidal was a regular customer here. He always came in very late and wanted to stay after we closed, so I got to talk to him quite a few times over the years. He would always want more martinis, which I can say he enjoyed immensely. Even if sitting down talking to him made me feel like a complete idiot because he's so brilliant, I mean he has a way with words that is incredible. What a great way to describe Musso's!

Tonje: Yes, that's exactly what I felt. Standing outside on Hollywood Boulevard with all its craziness, all I wanted was to seek shelter and then I step in here and it's like stepping back in time and I got this sudden sense of calm. And how happy I feel to finally sense that I'm part of Hollywood history. This place embodies everything I was drawn to with LA in the first place. It's just so rare to find it and to feel it.

Mark: You have to remember that Hollywood has always been, even from the beginning of movies, this eccentric place that attracted very eccentric, outgoing people. Maybe not to the extent you see now — but at every point through history it's always been an eccentric place.

Tonje: I'd like to think that Hollywood was more glamorous before and more elegant, perhaps less accessible in a way.

Mark: This strip was so different before in the 1930s and '40s. There was something going on every day of the week, whether

it was a show or a movie premiere. The Boulevard itself was lined with theatres but this got lost when a lot of the studios moved out of here and over the hill to Burbank. Only a few remain now — Paramount is still here. That's when this area lost some of its glamour. That's probably around the time when it turned into a tourist strip, which is sad. I would love to see the big studios back here like in the old days but LA is tough on studios; they taxed them so much, they had to get out. That's one of the reasons why Hollywood can't get anywhere close to the way it once was, and in this way we lose our past. We lose what LA was built on. As you can see when you look around here, Musso's is not a touristy place at all, 90 per cent of our clients are regulars.

Tonje: It's hard nowadays to track down the history of Hollywood in LA. I love the fact that you can relive the old days here.

Mark: Luckily we have been able to. And still most of our clientele are industry people who range in age from their mid-20s to mid-90s! There are still movie deals being cut every day at lunch. Actors are signed and deals are being made. It's not uncommon to see people who have been regulars at this place for 30 years mingle with the younger Hollywood crowd.

Tonje: I like that you can see so many older people here, I find it quite sad that LA is a place that hides away the history that the older generations represent. You barely see older people on the streets here.

Mark: It's not like in France or Italy where you see old and young people spending time together. To see generations having enthusiasm for old Hollywood history and mingling together gives me goose bumps. That's when I feel we have succeeded in maintaining this place.

Tonje: How do you keep the authenticity in somewhere like this?

Mark: That's my greatest task. It's a fine line to walk to maintain the history and also keep up with what is happening in the world. To find authenticity in LA is difficult, you have to put in a lot of work. Take the wood — it might look old and cracked to some people, but would I sand any of these cracks? No! It might have been one of Humphrey Bogart's rings that made those cracks. And it might be Charlie Chaplin's cigar smoke in the wallpaper. You can sit in the exact same booth where

Greta Garbo and Gary Cooper used to have breakfast together. You can hang by the bar where Lauren Bacall used to drink her martinis. Every day I sit down at the same desk that my great grandfather worked from, and everything we had to modernise is very subtle. How could I ever take away this significant Hollywood history? This dining room where we are now sitting is designed exactly as the infamous back room.

Tonje: Tell me about the back room.

Mark: It was called the writers' room. This was a room for them to go and confide in each other, drink and complain about the studios, drink their miseries away working for the corporate world.

Tonje: Yes, because the Screenwriters' Guild used to be next door?

Mark: That's right. A lot of studios brought big time novelists to write for them. The writers often felt constrained from what the studios wanted to see on the silver screen as opposed to what the novelists wanted to write about. A lot of these novelists were not used to being constrained, but the studios were paying them big money so a lot of them still came out here.

Tonje: Which novelists are you referring to?

Mark: Lots of greats; William Faulkner, Raymond Chandler, F. Scott Fitzgerald to name a few.

Tonje: Oh, tell me about Faulkner's mistress!

Mark: The story goes that they were here in the back room and Faulkner used to go behind the bar to mix his own mint juleps. So they were drinking, he got drunk and picked up a beautiful unknown woman. They drank together as people did in the back room and then they just went out in his car that was always parked at the same spot in our parking lot in the back. And you know what they wanted to do. She ended up being his mistress for the next 20 years and they were regulars at Musso's.

Tonje: And in the parking lot! They didn't even bother to get a hotel room.

Mark: No, at least not the first night. The parking lot was their place. It probably became a routine. The back room soon became known as "the writers' room". We would only let certain writers in there and in the glamorous age that began in the early '30s all the actors wanted to go. The back room was the talk of the town.

Tonje: Actors and writers seem to have felt protected here?

Mark: They did. There was a no photography policy here, in fact there still is, even to this day. No one is allowed to walk up to a celebrity or an actor here. This is and always has been a place where they can go with their families, a place where they could be themselves. It's not a place people went to be seen. I guess that's one of the reasons why we are still here, because we became like a private home for certain people and we didn't succumb to the press. That's why we survived, they felt protected here. Another important thing is that our servers always knew what they wanted to eat and drink. Orson Welles liked his gin fizzes, Faulkner always had mint juleps. And then there was the story about Mary Pickford and Douglas Fairbanks; they went to Italy a lot and on their honeymoon there they ate a fettuccini dish that the chef had created for his pregnant wife. They loved the dish so much they asked for the recipe, but the chef refused to give it to them. They came back to Musso's and asked the chef there to try and recreate it but he couldn't make it the way they wanted. Every now and then they went back to the same chef in Italy and begged for the recipe. They were denied until they decided to bring him a golden knife and fork as a gift and he finally gave them the recipe. After that, the Musso's chef made the fettuccini for them every time they came to eat here and we never put it on the menu. This was Mary Pickford and Douglas Fairbanks' dish only.

Tonje: I can picture them all here.

Mark: Yes, and most of them always sat in the same booth. Orson Welles always sat in booth 3, it became his booth. Marilyn Monroe also had her own booth. We have a server that has been here for 54 years, he served her the last years before she died when she always used to come here but he refuses to tell stories about her. He was so loyal and became her confidant in those last days. Somehow that keeps the mystery intact. We can only imagine her in here, what she would be wearing, how she, the biggest actress at that time, came here to feel at home, to feel safe and protected. F. Scott Fitzgerald proofread his novels sitting in his regular booth and Raymond Chandler wrote several chapters of *The Big Sleep* while drinking in the back room.