



BIG DEAL on 55TH STREET

At Manhattan's Core Club, moguls mingle with artists, and financiers with

Hollywood's elite. Mark Van de Walle checks out the private club with soul.



Clockwise from top left: The Core Club's bar, library, art-filled neon lobby; members of the staff (founder Jennie Saunders sits center); a suite; a cocktail; works by David LaChapelle; the outdoor patio at the restaurant; the third-floor lobby; the restaurant's interior.

It's the sleek high-rise exterior and the frosted glass doors and the too-cool-for-school art that hit you with the first shock of something new...and different and exciting. Next is the expensive clickety-clack traffic of its smart, au courant members—masters and mistresses of a bold new post-recession universe of Louboutin-heeled execs and hedge fund operators in croc loafers toting Gucci gym bags. Hey, and isn't that Marianne Boesky, owner of the eponymous Chelsea gallery, sitting in the dining room under *Flood*, the immense canvas by her artist Barnaby Furnas? And wasn't it in that very same dining room where, not too many nights ago, ex-Microsoft chief technology officer Nathan Myhrvold prepared dishes—like pressure-cooked carrot soup and goat milk ricotta with centrifuged peas—from his recently published six-volume, \$625 book *Modernist Cuisine*?

Toto, I don't think we're in the world of the traditional old boys club any longer. From the beginning, the Core was meant to be a breed apart, a club with heart and soul—not to mention men and women, which can still be something of a rarity in the private New York club scene. But also one with the city's toughest personal trainers, the best food in clubland (its first chef, Dan Kluger, was stolen by Jean-Georges Vongerichten to open his new, critically lauded ABC Kitchen) and a clientele that mixed Fortune 500 types with, say, members of *The Paris Review's* Board of Trustees (the second-floor library was curated by the *Review's* former publisher, Lea Carpenter). All this, along with mind-blowing contemporary art (no Gilbert Stuarts above a marble mantelpiece here) that could fetch a fortune at auction, an in-house hairstylist, a manicurist, a masseuse—and Dangene, L.A.'s hottest facialist who's known by first name only (see "From Head to Toe").

This updated version of intimate luxury is the brainchild of Jennie Saunders, a svelte, stylishly dressed, high-energy blonde who is often caught working (on her BlackBerry, of course) at a table in the club's restaurant, now helmed by Frenchman Bernard Liberatore. Back in 2000, with the first Internet boom at its height, Saunders's idea was to create a members-only virtual community—an online version of TED and Davos, a kind of social network that was also part eBay and part cultural guide and curator for the very successful. Eventually, Saunders says, she planned to move all the services and people offline and into the real world. Then the tech bubble burst and September 11 happened. At this point, most people—most sensible people, anyway—would have backed down. Saunders, who grew up in

New York's Westchester County watching her father finance a dental degree by driving a garbage truck, thought, "Why not just do the craziest thing and turn the club into a real place?" She had the experience: She was part of the team that launched Reebok Sports Club, one of the first luxury gyms. But she needed funding. Scouring for potential investors, she ended up with a list of 13 industries and the people whom she believed had transformed them, or were about to do so, and set out to recruit them. "We constructed these boxes—handmade and gorgeous," she says of the club's fancy marketing packages. "[Inside was a book that] told our story about how we hoped to transform the idea of a club. I had a friend or a peer get it to each person so it'd be clear that it was something important." The story,

combined with Saunders's unwavering intensity, was compelling enough to get 150 people, including superagent Ari Emanuel, billionaire financier Stephen Schwarzman and real estate tycoon Aby Rosen, to invest \$100,000 each (and become founding members).

Rosen, one of the first to invest, provided more than money: He also gave Saunders the first six floors of a slick condominium tower he was then finishing. The results, he says, are better than he'd hoped for. "You can do anything at Core. It has art, design, business and living all in one place. It's a club for the 21st century."

And in its six years, Saunders has attracted a who's who of the media, technology and finance elite, not to mention movers and shakers from the worlds of art, architecture, fashion, sports and politics: architect Richard Meier, financier Nathaniel Rothschild and football star Dan Marino, along with Boesky and Myhrvold.

At breakfast and lunch, it's clear what Rosen is talking about. Unlike nearly every other club in New York, tables are filled with people working on laptops and iPads, talking on their smartphones or video chatting via Skype. At the same time, the Core isn't all business. "There's a genuine warmth here," says 1-800-Flowers founder Jim McCann. "When I come in, I'm completely relaxed." The intimacy isn't just PR boilerplate. Every staffer really does seem to know the names of all 1,400 members, as well as minutiae about their lives and those of their families. (Constantly updated electronic profiles detail everything from members' favorite wines to their preference in Broadway shows.)

Most clubs supply a beautiful venue, along with an aura of tradition. The Core provides the former but subtly tweaks the latter. The materials could be found in a classic club interior (oak, mahogany, marble, leather), but here they're utilized in unexpected ways. Oak undulates from one floor to the next along a staircase, and marble lines entire corridors, not just floors and mantles. It's comfortable, almost residential. "Jennie insisted it be



THE DETAILS

LOCATION
60 E. 55th St.,
between Park and
Madison avenues.

AMENITIES
A library, screening
room, masseuse,
barber shop, one-
of-a-kind cultural
programming and a
restaurant headed by
master chef Bernard
Liberatore.

COST
\$50,000 initiation fee,
\$15,000 annual dues.

TO JOIN
Call or e-mail
membership
manager Adrienne
Loia at 212-381-7878
or adrienne.loia@
coreaccess.net.

like a home," says Jean-Gabriel Neukomm, from SPaN, the firm that designed it. "She wanted it to feel like the house you like best from your collection of houses." In keeping with that, there's a rotating collection of more than 50 artworks on loan from members, from Andy Warhol's celebrity portraits in the library to a Gregory Crewdson photograph in the lobby to a Kenny Scharf painting in the gym. It's the Core's ethos in physical form, a meeting of the traditional and the contemporary, comfortable and smart.

Still, Saunders insisted that a beautiful space wasn't enough: The club had to be able to provide everything for its members. (No easy task when many have the influence and wherewithal to procure just about anything on their own.) It had to be their favorite restaurant and their favorite place to get a haircut, too. It had to be a place where they could have a power lunch and, at night, hear first-rate cultural figures, like *The New York Times's* Andrew Ross Sorkin, talk and have dinner with them afterward. Or where they could go to the screening room and have Hugh Jackman and Paul Haggis introduce a film. And if they wanted to escape the city, they could take off in a Rolls-Royce (the company sometimes sponsors events) to a member's estate for a tour of the only residential building in America designed by Ai Weiwei, followed by a look at a collection of the Chinese artist's work.

On a recent summer evening, the restaurant is buzzing, tables are filled with stylish members young and old, enjoying chef Liberatore's modern take on classic fare, like sliders with foie gras and greenmarket pea soup with coconut foam. "All our customers are regulars," says Liberatore, and they can eat anywhere they choose in one of the world's great cities for food, "so it can't be like cooking for an ordinary restaurant. Every dish must delight, every time."

When Saunders said she wanted the club to be its members' favorite place for a haircut, she wasn't speaking for effect. The Core's Torey Grobes is one of the city's best barbers. He's able to look at a man's hair, see immediately what needs to be done and take care of it—fast. It's no wonder rock legend and founding member Roger Waters had him cut his hair before he played the Garden.

"Core is like the house you like best from your collection of houses."

So what's made the Core so appealing for this high-powered group that could belong to any club? "When I'm there, I'm spending time with a group of people who are working as hard as I am, so there's this sense of earning your relaxation," says Marianne Boesky. But more importantly, says Todd Thomson, a onetime Citigroup CEO who has since struck out on his own and a member for four years, "the Core exists for its members and not the other way around." All it takes is one day to see what they both mean. Members who came for a business breakfast stayed for lunch (and more meetings). After catching a screening downstairs, they had dinner. Everyone looked more than happy to have spent the day eating, working and relaxing in the same place, just as though the Core Club really was their favorite home. ■

FROM HEAD TO TOE

Facialist Dangene is Core's secret agent—cum—antiaging guru.



Dangene (left) and the Core Club's spa and treatment room

If it's brown, red, bumpy or veiny, we take it off." Dangene (one name only, like Cher and Prince) is explaining the approach behind her power facials at the Core Club. Forget spa-like sessions: Here, facials involve heavy machinery. Lady Gaga provides the soundtrack. The treatment begins with Dangene's assessment of your skin under the kind of light usually reserved for the enhanced interrogation of terrorist suspects. She then shifts you to her team of "mini-me's," who caution that they're not interested in providing relaxation. There's serious antiaging work to be done, from head to toe: While arms and legs are given dry microdermabrasion with a diamond-tip wand and glycolic acid, the face is given wet dermabrasion with infused vitamins. Wearing a bit of wraparound terry cloth, you pad from one wood-paneled room to another for oxygen therapy and a battery of lasers that plump up collagen and eradicate hyperpigmentation or broken capillaries.

Dangene trained as an aesthetician right after high school but is otherwise self-taught. Her first achievement was curing herself of adult-onset acne (to the clients who promise to follow her regimen, she guarantees to treat the issue until it's gone). At 52, she has heavily kohled

eyes but eschews other makeup. "The goal is to get your skin in such good shape that it looks like you're wearing foundation," she says. She also disdains any sunscreen whose ingredients resemble a science experiment (she uses natural zinc or titanium oxide, or diaper cream in a pinch), and she has the salon's laundry done in-house so she can control the chemicals. One regular, who recently turned 40 and describes herself as a sun worshipper, says that weekly facials with Dangene have allowed her to shave off a decade without engendering disbelief. Another describes the experience as an everything-available-to-make-you-look-better-without-surgery buffet but warns, "If you don't go regularly, your skin returns to normal pretty quickly. It's a costly addiction."

Eliminating every imperfection can involve what's known in the trade as "downtime," but Dangene recognizes that some people must go right back to work. When a TV reporter called ahead to make sure she wouldn't look blotchy on camera after her facial, Dangene reassured her: "No, no. Pretty, pretty." —AIMEE LEE BALL

The first session is \$1,500; a series of 12 treatments starts at \$9,500; dangene.com.