Year after year.
Decade after decade.
P.J.’s has always been, quite simply: The place.

The first time you encounter P.J. Clarke’s is always unforgettable.

You are walking down a bustling midtown street, dodging tourists and businesspeople, checking your map to make sure you’ve got the address right (because it doesn’t quite seem possible that a 130-year-old saloon could exist within this canyon of skyscrapers), when all of a sudden – and it is truly all of a sudden, because when approached from either direction, P.J. Clarke’s is almost entirely blocked out by its towering modern neighbors – you find yourself standing in front of a little two-story red brick Victorian building, like a leftover set piece from a period movie.

Except that, unlike a movie set, the details here are absolutely, unmistakably right: The brick is beautifully weathered, with the kind of knife-thin mortaring you find only on buildings of a certain vintage. The eaves and trim have been painted over so many times the details melt together. And the quaint row of double-hung windows wrap all the way around the first floor, built when it would have been inconceivable that another building would ever be so close as to crowd the view. It may be clichéd to say that an experience is “like going back in time.” But standing on the corner of 55th Street and Third Avenue in front of the legendary P.J. Clarke’s for the first time, you might be only slightly more surprised if a newsboy in knickers and a wool cap approached with a newspaper announcing the end of Prohibition.
Yet somehow, despite its obvious age, P.J. Clarke’s is not a dusty vestige or nostalgia trip. Step inside and you will see smartly dressed businessmen hashing out deals over beers and hamburgers. Local workers arguing about sports, recent graduates, office workers, old men, and neighborhood women trading war stories over gin and tonics. The place buzzing, vibrant, and completely – as they say – relevant. And you get the feeling that it has managed to pull off this trick – the trick of being timeless, not old-timey – for its entire century-plus-long existence. Year after year. Decade after decade. P.J.’s has always been, quite simply: the place.

P.J.’s is well known for its quirky features. There’s the pay phone that has remained broken for decades. There’s the pair of human leg bones snugged in the rafters, an Irish talisman of luck. (Who put the leg bones there or to what poor soul they once belonged is unknown.) There’s Skippy, the bar’s canine mascot, who was sent to the taxidermist by the old gang after he met his untimely demise at the wheels of a car, though it turns out whether his name was actually Skippy or not is up for some debate. There are the amazing urinals (yes, urinals). So outrageously big they have become an attraction in their own right. So big that Sinatra once wryly observed that diminutive New York mayor Abe Beam could take up residence in one with room to spare. And perhaps most famously, there are the ashes of baseball player Phil Kennedy, who was such a devoted regular he willed his remains to the saloon, where they have been safeguarded behind the bar ever since. Ask the bartender and he may bring out the urn. Like many things at P.J.’s, it’s considered good luck.

The thing about all these curious features is that P.J.’s comes by them honestly. They’re not there to impart old-time charm. They’re not there as decorating choices. They’re there because something actually happened. Because somewhere along the line, someone – most certainly a regular – marched in with a pair of leg bones and said, “Hey, let’s put these above the door!” and everyone agreed that would be an excellent idea. And because when the pay phone broke, someone suggested that it would be better just to leave it that way – who wants to hear all that one-sided yakking anyway? And because, very recently, a war vet returned from Afghanistan with an American flag, and the regulars knew it could hang only in one place: behind the bar for everyone to see, where by all rights it will remain for the next 100 years, so that someday in the future, the regulars will point to the old flag and tell the story of a long-ago soldier from a long-ago war. So to the regulars, these curious features aren’t really curious at all. They’re history.

If you haven’t already gathered, at P.J. Clarke’s it always comes down to stories. Everyone has one. The wife they met there. The girl they didn’t. The first time their father took them there. Or, perhaps, the last time they were there together. Some of the stories are profane. Some are funny. Some are fascinating. Some are poignant. Some are, frankly, not terribly interesting except to the person telling it. And some – not surprisingly, the ones involving celebrities – have become legendary.

There’s the one about how Buddy Holly, just days after meeting young receptionist Maria Elena Santiago at Peer-Southern Records, brought her to P.J.’s and proposed on the spot before a stunned crowd. (He presented her a single rose with a ring around the stem.) Elizabeth Taylor loved to stop by late. Actor Richard Harris made PJ’s his first stop after landing at Idlewild (now JFK) and always ordered “the usual”: A hamburger and six double vodkas. Jackie Kennedy made it a tradition to eat hamburgers there with her two young charges, John Jr. and Caroline. And Nat King Cole, in a moment of inspiration, declared the cheeseburgers to be “The Cadillac of burgers,” giving name to what is now P.J.’s signature menu item.

For obvious reasons, the celebrity stories are the ones most frequently repeated. But it would be a mistake to think that P.J.’s is somehow a celebrity bar. It’s not. It just so happens that the same vibrant, communal, egalitarian spirit that has always been central to the P.J.’s experience appeals as much to the famous as it does to everyone else. And if you stop by and have a drink, you’ll be part of the story, too.

Because even after over a century, the book of P.J. Clarke’s is still being written.
History

A cultural and architectural holdout, P.J. Clarke’s has soldiered on through the Depression, Prohibition, two World Wars, and an onslaught of high-rises and office towers. It has had five owners in its history.

None of them liked change.

HUMBLE BEGINNINGS
1868 – 1912

If anyone in the late 19th century had known that P.J. Clarke’s would become the institution that it is today, they would have perhaps taken greater care to record its early history. However, as it stands, the origins of the legendary bar are somewhat murky.

What is known is that the little red brick building itself was constructed in 1868 for unknown, or at least unstated, purposes on a squalid patch of land labeled in city records simply as “squatters’ shacks” (what became of said squatters is unknown). Sometime in 1884, the building was converted to a watering hole by one Mr. Jennings, who saw an opportunity to intercept the flow of Irish laborers as they travelled to and from their jobs at the neighborhood’s slaughterhouses, breweries, manufactories, tanneries, and construction sites. Certainly if anyone deserved a drink, it was they. And Mr. Jennings was happy to oblige.

P.J. Clarke’s did not become “P.J. Clarke’s” until another Irish immigrant, Mr. Patrick Joseph Clarke (“Paddy,” natch), arrived in the neighborhood sometime in or around 1902 – not to work as a slaughterhouse laborer, tannery roustabout, or hodman but as the newly hired bartender under the saloon’s second owner, the Englishman Mr. Duneen. (What became of the first owner, Mr. Jennings, or when exactly the bar transferred ownership to Mr. Duneen is unknown. As is, for that matter, either Mr. Jennings’ or Mr. Duneen’s first names.) An industrious and apparently thrifty lad, Paddy tended bar and also more or less ran the saloon for ten years before saving enough to purchase it outright from Mr. Duneen in 1912. For his part, Mr. Duneen was apparently eager to sell, having become disenchanted with New York City and, in his estimation, its lack of honest women, retreating shortly thereafter to his native England to secure a “proper wife.” Whether he succeeded in this endeavor or not, like many details of P.J. Clarke’s earliest days, appears to have been lost to history.
THE MAKINGS OF A LEGEND
1912 – 1948

Most small businesses, especially in a city as fickle as New York, must adapt to survive, let alone thrive. But during the period when Paddy Clarke and his ever-expanding brood were running the show, just the opposite appears to have been true.

All around the little red brick bar, momentous changes were taking place as the neighborhood’s industrial heritage ceded to its white-collar future. Slaughterhouses were relocated to the outer boroughs. Breweries along the East River, including the legendary Doelger’s, were shuttered. Luxury apartments were built along Avenue A, which was, in itself, an early stroke of branding brilliance and Tammany Hall graft, officially renamed to the more fashion-forward “Sutton Place.” Tenements were razed to clear space for middle-class apartments. And a few blocks west, the massive Rockefeller Plaza was constructed – to this day the largest private building project in history – bringing with it a wave of office workers, publishers, news reporters, and media moguls.

In the face of this cultural and economic upheaval, P.J.’s of course remained stubbornly, defiantly, and proudly the same. Despite this – or more likely, because of it – the bar thrived and the legend began to grow. Even Prohibition produced barely a hiccup, as P.J.’s used its discreet “wives’ window” (where women and children would come to fill pails of beer, women being prohibited from entering the bar until the ’60s) to screen customers and give neighborly handouts to cops on the local beat.

Sometime in the 1940s, P.J.’s – already a local institution – was discovered by the celebrity set. A fresh-faced Frank Sinatra ended many of his nights at table #20, and was known to tip extremely well. Singer Johnny Mercer penned “One for My Baby” on a napkin while sitting at the antique mahogany bar (itself built by Ehret, America’s first great brewer). Charles Jackson, author of the classic book The Lost Weekend was a regular, and the bar scenes for the Academy Award-winning movie adaptation were shot there. And so the legend grew.

STANDING TALL AMONG GIANTS
1948 – 2000

Patrick Joseph and his family ran P.J. Clarke’s until 1948, at which point it was sold to their upstairs neighbors, the Lavezzos – antique dealers and restorers who ran their business out of the second floor. The Lavezzos also bought
the building itself for the princely sum of $19,000 (over $300k in today’s dollars) – a decision that, with the Third Avenue El about to be dismantled and the subsequent skyscraper boom in the ’50s, would prove to be among the most critical in the history of P.J. Clarke’s.

When the noisy, dilapidated Third Avenue El was torn down in 1955, the world around P.J. Clarke’s changed yet again. Real estate prices took off. Skyrocketing rents forced out small businesses. Building owners cashed in and moved on. And skyscrapers jumped up around the little brick building – already an anachronism, and now taking on almost storybook qualities, like a tiny lighthouse shining bravely through fog or a feisty tugboat chugging along amidst towering waves. It was the little red bar that could.

Despite pressure from developers and the obvious lure of financial riches, the Lavezzos refused to sell out. Perhaps it was a matter of pride. Or perhaps it was because, by this point, P.J.’s had been so completely embraced by its regulars that to do so would have been tantamount to treason. Whatever the case, P.J.’s hung on until, in 1967, the Lavezzo family was able to negotiate a 99-year lease with a developer, securing the future of the bar.

Over the next decades, the city continued to change around P.J.’s, and P.J.’s continued to stay exactly the same, serving a loyal mix of locals, laborers, office workers, and celebrities. Buddy Holly proposed to his wife there. Elizabeth Taylor loved to stop by late. Richard Harris was known for his promethean appetite for double vodkas. Jackie Kennedy would stop by with her young son, John Jr. And Nat King Cole declared the cheeseburgers to be “The Cadillac of burgers,” establishing the name of what would become P.J. Clarke’s signature dish.

“*The Vatican of Saloons.*”

– The New York Times

**TODAY**

In the early 2000s, P.J. Clarke’s, along with the rest of the city, suffered with the economic downturn. And after a period of uncertainty, it was purchased in 2002 by Arnold Penner and restaurateur Philip Scotti – a man whose own story, like that of the Clarkes and the Lavezozos, was one of classic immigrant success, his family having built the famed Philadelphia-area grocery chain Genuardi’s starting with a single farm stand in 1920. Phil and Arnold rounded up a group of their friends to help out, including actor Timothy Hutton and New York Yankees’ owner George Steinbrenner – both longtime patrons and personal fans of P.J.’s.

P.J.’s regulars were understandably nervous about the change in ownership. They had come to see the bar as their own and worried what changes may be in store. Their fears seemed justified when the new owners shut the place down and announced an ominous-sounding “renovation.”

As it turned out, there was no need for concern. The new owners had purchased P.J.’s for what it had always been, not for what it could become. And aside from a much-needed cleaning, a shored-up exterior wall, and improvements to the infrastructure, they had no interest in tampering with what made the place so special. Quite the opposite: They took extreme care to return every tile on the floor, every photo on the wall, and every other detail of the bar to its exact position.

At the reopening, the line went around the block, and patrons stacked four-deep at the bar. The regulars were there to inspect the changes and were much relieved to find virtually none.

P.J. Clarke’s was back. Better than ever. And the same as it ever was.
Famous Faces

Jackie Kennedy Onassis
Mrs. Onassis was a regular in the 1970s, often bringing John Jr. and Caroline for lunch on Saturdays.

Frank Sinatra
P.J. Clarke’s was Mr. Sinatra’s favorite place to end a night on the town. He was considered the “owner” of table #20, where his photo now hangs, and was known to be an extremely generous tipper.

Nat King Cole
In the late 1950s, Mr. Cole describes the bacon cheeseburger at P.J.’s to be “The Cadillac of burgers,” providing the name for what would become the saloon’s signature dish. He retained a bar account there for years.

Johnny Mercer
Wrote the hit song “One for My Baby (And One for the Road)” on a napkin while seated at P.J.’s antique mahogany bar, which was itself installed at the turn of the 20th century by another famous name: George Ehret, America’s first great brewer.

Liza Minnelli
A regular at the Third Avenue location, Minnelli still holds a bar account and is known for her devotion to P.J.’s burger.

Dick Clark
After ringing in the New Year with America, Clark made P.J. Clarke’s his traditional post-broadcast destination, where his first meal of the New Year was always a burger.

Johnny Depp & Keith Richards
Depp gifted Richards a guitar after dinner with their wives at P.J. Clarke’s upstairs dining room. Richards treated customers to an impromptu rendition of “Brown Sugar.”

Richard Harris
Harris always went to P.J.’s first thing after arriving in the city from his native Ireland, ordering “the usual,” which was known to be a simple P.J. Clarke’s burger with six double vodkas.

Dave Matthews Band
Matthews wrote “Stolen Away on 55th & 3rd,” inspired by a girl he met at P.J. Clarke’s.

Buddy Holly
Days after meeting receptionist Maria Elena, Mr. Holly invited her to dinner at P.J. Clarke’s and proposed by offering her a single red rose with a ring around the stem.

Ted Kennedy
The late Democratic Massachusetts Senator made P.J. Clarke’s a regular stop and consoled himself with a burger there the day after his loss to Jimmy Carter in the Democratic primaries.

Jake LaMotta
The only undefeated heavyweight champ in history attended Esquire’s 70th Anniversary party at P.J. Clarke’s with his wife.

Brooke Shields
Celebrated her daughter’s baptism with a celebratory meal at P.J. Clarke’s, just as her father had done with her.

On Screen

Mad Men
In the Season One episode “The Hobo Code,” Peggy Olsen and the rest of the Sterling Cooper gang celebrate a successful pitch at P.J. Clarke’s, where they knock back beers and do the twist.

The Lost Weekend
In the movie, Ray Milland frequents P.J. Clarke’s (“Nat’s Bar”), his beloved watering hole. Charles Jackson, a P.J.’s regular, wrote the book upon which the Academy Award-winning movie was based.

French Connection II
While going cold turkey from a forced heroin injection, Gene Hackman’s character, Popeye Doyle orders a P.J. Clarke’s burger to take the edge off his pain in the famed 1975 film.

Annie Hall
In the final scene of Woody Allen’s Annie Hall, Alvy and Annie say goodbye for the final time at the exact location where P.J. Clarke’s Lincoln Square now lies.

Barefoot in the Park
During Act II of Neil Simon’s play, a fight between Paul and Corie breaks out in which Paul spits, “Do you know, in P.J. Clarke’s last New Year’s Eve, I punched an old woman?… Don’t tell me about drunks.”
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<th>Name</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ted Franklin</td>
<td>247 Madison Ave.</td>
<td>212-866-5555</td>
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<tr>
<td>James H. Miller</td>
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<td>212-456-7890</td>
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<tr>
<td>Richard Hochman</td>
<td>100 Fifth Ave.</td>
<td>212-987-6543</td>
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<tr>
<td>Frederick P. Potter</td>
<td>345 67th St.</td>
<td>212-123-4567</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mr. Henry Ford II</td>
<td>1234 5th Ave.</td>
<td>212-789-0123</td>
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<td>Frank J. Fongio</td>
<td>Symbolic Inc.</td>
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<td>Joe G. O'Conner</td>
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<td>John T. Smith</td>
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Curiosities

• Two human leg bones stick out of the ceiling above the bar – known as an Irish-American good luck charm.

• One of P.J. Clarke’s most dedicated regulars, Phil Kennedy, asked that his ashes stay in possession of P.J. Clarke’s. A week later, the baseball player passed away. His wife delivered them to the restaurant, where they have remained behind the bar ever since.

• In the early ‘60s, the bar’s terrier mascot, “Skippy,” passed away after a car ran him over. Regulars pulled together enough money to have their friend stuffed. Perched above the bar, he has stood guard ever since.

• The cigarette machine and pay phone have never been repaired, even decades after they first broke.

• P.J. Clarke’s is famous for its oversized porcelain urinals. Frank Sinatra once joked they were so big that then mayor Abe Beam could take up residence in one with room to spare.
Timeline

125 Years of Good Times... and Counting

1868: The brick building that would become P.J. Clarke’s is constructed on 55th Street and Third Avenue in New York, replacing an area referred to in city records only as “squatters’ shacks.”

1884: Mr. Jennings converts the building into a watering hole to cater to the Irish immigrant laborers who rode the newly constructed Third Avenue El to their workplaces in the tanneries, breweries, and construction sites in the area.

1902: Patrick J. Clarke arrives from Ireland by boat and is hired as a bartender by Englishman Mr. Duneen, who now runs the saloon.

1912: P.J. Clarke’s becomes “P.J. Clarke’s” when Mr. Duneen returns to his native England in search of a “proper wife” and sells the bar to Patrick J. Clarke.

1920: Prohibition begins. P.J. Clarke’s uses its side entrance on 55th Street to admit regulars, screening newcomers through its discreet “wives’ window.”

1940s: Frank Sinatra typically ends his nights on the town at P.J. Clarke’s table #20. Louis Armstrong uses P.J. Clarke’s back room to practice trumpet during the early morning.

1941: Famous singer Johnny Mercer pens “One for My Baby” on a napkin while sitting at the bar at P.J. Clarke’s. Reportedly, Mercer later phones bartender Tommy Joyce to apologize for not including him in the song, explaining: “I couldn’t get your name to rhyme.”

1948: On April 23, 1948, Patrick J. Clarke passes away. The Clarke family sells the business and building to the upstairs neighbors, the Lavezzos, antique dealers and restorers.

1953: P.J. Clarke’s is featured in a LIFE magazine spread on August 3, which depicts the sweltering NYC summer and notes that locals stay cool by visiting the bar.

1955: The Third Avenue El is torn down, and with it, many more neighborhood institutions, to make way for the skyscraper boom of the ’50s.

1945: Charles R. Jackson writes much of The Lost Weekend at P.J. Clarke’s, which is later featured in the movie adaptation starring Ray Milland.

1958: Singer Buddy Holly proposes to receptionist Maria Elena Santiago in front of a stunned crowd just days after meeting her at Peer-Southern Music. She accepts.

1960: “I adore the hamburgers at P.J. Clarke’s. In my drinking days, it was my first stop from the airport,” says Richard Harris, an Irish actor, who always ordered six double vodkas.

1963: P.J.’s beloved dog and unofficial bar mascot, “Skippy,” passes away after being hit by a car. Regulars pool funds to have him stuffed. He has remained at the bar ever since.

1964: Ernest Borgnine and Ethel Merman announce their plans to marry to the crowd at P.J.’s. They divorce after two months.

1967: Despite receiving numerous bids to buy 915 Third Avenue, the Lavezzos hold out, refusing to sell at any price. The Lavezzos eventually negotiate a 99-year lease, a deal that The New York Times describes as “David who prevailed over Goliath.”


1970s: Jackie Kennedy brings John Jr. and Caroline in for Saturday burgers, claiming dibs on her favorite table.

1975: Popeye Doyle orders a P.J. Clarke’s hamburger in the 1975 film French Connection II.

1980: Ted Kennedy, former Democratic Massachusetts Senator, comes to P.J. Clarke’s for lunch the day after he loses the Democratic nomination to Jimmy Carter. During this decade, regulars also include Tony Bennett, Hedy Lamarr, Eugene O’Neill, Alice Faye, Ted Kennedy, Phil Kennedy, and Leroy Neiman, among others.
1984: P.J. Clarke’s celebrates its centennial.

1985: Baseball player Phil Kennedy tells staff members that he wants his ashes to be kept at P.J. Clarke’s. When he dies, his wife delivers them to the restaurant where they remain behind the bar.

2002 – 2003: Philip Scotti and Arnold Penner purchase P.J. Clarke’s and shut down the restaurant for a year of renovations. A year, a month, and a day later, P.J. Clarke’s reopens to a line around the door and patrons stacked four-deep at the bar.

2003: Boxing champ Jake LaMotta and his wife attend Esquire magazine’s 70th Anniversary party, held at P.J. Clarke’s in conjunction with the restaurant’s grand reopening. LaMotta still visits the restaurant where a photo from his earlier boxing days hangs.

2003: Sidecar opens – an exclusive upstairs dining room in the space formerly occupied by the Lavezzo family.

2005: “Stolen Away on 55th & 3rd,” a song written by the Dave Matthews Band, is reportedly about a girl Matthews met at P.J. Clarke’s.

2006: P.J. Clarke’s on the Hudson opens.

2007: P.J. Clarke’s at Lincoln Square opens.

2007: In “The Hobo Code” from Mad Men’s first season, Peggy Olson and the rest of Sterling Cooper celebrate a successful pitch at P.J. Clarke’s.

2008: P.J. Clarke’s in São Paulo, Brazil, opens.

2010: P.J. Clarke’s in Washington, DC, opens two blocks north of the White House. Walt Disney’s wrought-iron and milk glass solarium is installed as the entrance to Sidecar.


2011: On April 29, Maria Elena Holly presents P.J. Clarke’s with a never-before-seen “True Love Ways” photo showing her wedding kiss with husband Buddy Holly. It hangs beside their table where he first proposed to her.
Locations

While the original remains on the corner of 55th Street and Third Avenue in New York City, the P.J. Clarke’s tradition lives on at Lincoln Square and the Hudson in New York City, as well as Washington, DC, Las Vegas, and São Paulo.

Third Avenue, New York
915 Third Avenue, at 55th Street  212.317.1616

The Capitol Retreat, Washington, DC
1600 K Street NW  202.463.6610

Lincoln Square, New York
44 West 63rd Street  212.957.9700

On the Strip, Las Vegas
The Forum Shops at Caesars, 3500 South Las Vegas Boulevard  702.434.7900

On the Hudson, New York
Four World Financial Center  212.285.1500

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