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FALL TRAVEL

# Exit Strategies

**Nostalgia** by Paul Slansky

# Orson Welles Sat Right Over There

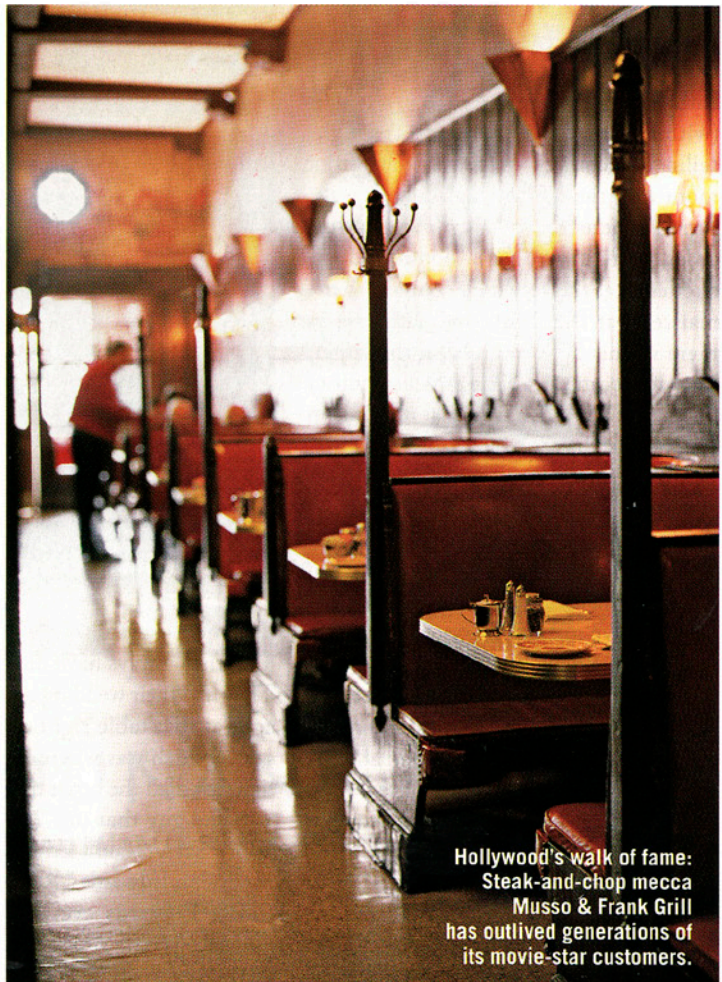
After 87 years, Musso & Frank Grill is still the toast of Hollywood—fabulous as it ever was.

**W**hen the oldest restaurant in Hollywood first opened for business, three months after World War I ended and four months before Prohibition began, it shared its neighborhood with avocado groves, eucalyptus trees and even a gently flowing stream.

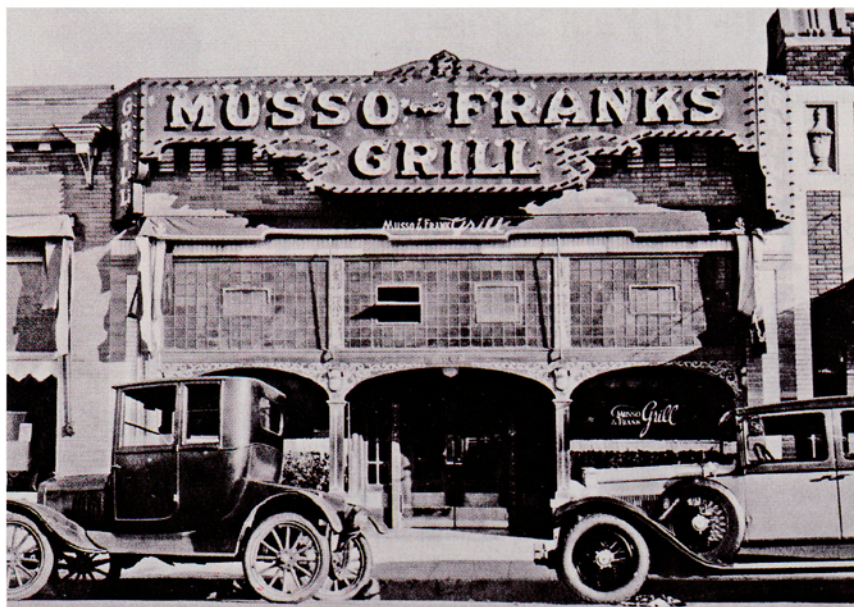
It wasn't long before all that nature was replaced by the motion picture industry, which offered America's best writers the opportunity to earn the kind of money they could never make by merely writing brilliant books. Longtime Angelenos like John Fante, Raymond Chandler and Budd Schulberg were joined by newcomers such as William Faulkner, F. Scott Fitzgerald and John O'Hara, and their mutual attraction to this restaurant turned it into a kind of West Coast Algonquin, complete with Dorothy Parker, who traded in New York's round table for the long, elegant bar and high-backed red leather mahogany booths of the Musso & Frank Grill.

Eighty-seven years after it opened, Musso's, as it is commonly known, is not only at this original location but is still providing today's customers with the same dining experience—from the unchanged decor to the virtually identical (but for the prices) menu—enjoyed six or seven decades ago by the likes of Humphrey Bogart, Joan Crawford and Charlie Chaplin (and enjoyed currently by, among others, Johnny Depp and Keith Richards, both reportedly excellent tippers).

Though its front entrance sits on a stretch of Hollywood Boulevard that has yet to enjoy the renaissance provided a few blocks west by the Kodak Theatre complex, the seediness of the street is irrelevant, since most customers enter through the rear door off the no-



Hollywood's walk of fame: Steak-and-chop mecca Musso & Frank Grill has outlived generations of its movie-star customers.



Hearty fare since 1919

valet parking lot, walking down a flight of stairs and past the kitchen (presided over by chef Michel Bourger, who took over in 1976 from his predecessor, Jean Leon Rue, himself there since 1922), past the bathrooms and the wooden phone booths (with folding doors!) and into the high-ceilinged, scone-lit, wood-paneled front room with the fading English hunt wallpaper, where they walk down narrow aisles, past diners in cozy booths or banquettes or at the very long counter, to the maître d' at the front, who either seats them in this dark room or in the larger, brighter room next door that also houses the classic bar where the best martinis in L.A., or maybe anywhere, are served.

**E**arly on a Tuesday evening in late August, that bar is already crowded. “We used to have John Huston, David Carradine, we used to have all those guys every night,” says Ruben Rueda, the bartender here for the past 38 years. “One of the weirdest guys I ever saw was Orson Welles. He never talked to nobody. He would look at himself in the mirror all the time. I saw once he talked to Charlton Heston, but that was the only one I saw.”

“I’ve been coming here since 1970,” says 82-year-old Roy Kohn. He and his wife, Gloria, 63, live in Rancho Mirage now, but whenever they make the hun-



dred-mile drive into L.A. to see their doctors, they always have dinner at Musso’s. They had their wedding reception 20 years ago “at that table right over there,” Roy says, “which was where what’s-his-name that just died the other day always sat.”

“The guy that did *This Is Your Life*,” Gloria says. “Ralph Edwards.”

“Ralph Edwards,” Roy agrees. “In fact, Ralph Edwards every Christmas sent poinsettias, the most beautiful bouquet you’ve ever seen.”

“Beautiful,” Gloria says emphatically. “Huge.”

“I was sitting here one afternoon,” Roy says, “and at the very time they were getting divorced, Sean Penn was sitting at the Ralph Edwards table, and she was sitting on the other side of the room.”

“Madonna,” Gloria says.

“I’ve seen many artists here over the years,” Roy says. “One night Mary Hart was sitting at that table over there.”

“And George Hamilton right over there,” adds Gloria.

“And on the phone over there was what’s-her-name, Jamie Curtis—”

“We heard the whole conversation.”

“That’s what happens at this restaurant,” says Roy.

“Dom DeLuise was here,” Gloria says, lost in the memory of that star-studded evening. “We’ve been all over the world,

to a certain point, and nothing is quite like this place.”

“The menu,” says Roy. “The menu is unbelievable.”

“The waiters,” Gloria chimes in, “the attention they give you, it’s phenomenal. And the bar. When people come to this bar, they merge. No matter what generation, 10, 20, 30, 40 years apart, they wind up talking to each other.”

Instantly confirming this, a gentleman decades her junior joins in. “Sand dabs,”

says Stephan Bataillard of fillets of Pacific flounder sautéed in butter that Musso's is famous for. "Who else has sand dabs on the menu?"

Roy puts it all in perspective. "It is," he says firmly, "the best restaurant in the whole world."

**M**y wife Liz and I had our first meal together at Musso's, two weeks after the 1994 Northridge earthquake (and the day after the first Lyle Menendez jury hung). When a friend out from New York wanted to introduce us, we both suggested dinner at Musso's—mutual appreciation of the place was one of our earliest bonds. Despite our limited budgets, we dined there frequently thereafter, having figured out how to afford it: Skip the alcohol and appetizers, fill up on bread and order a hot chicken, turkey or lamb sandwich with a large scoop of perfect mashed potatoes.

On this night, we are less frugal. We drink our martinis and spend several de-



Take your time to look over the menu, all 200 items.

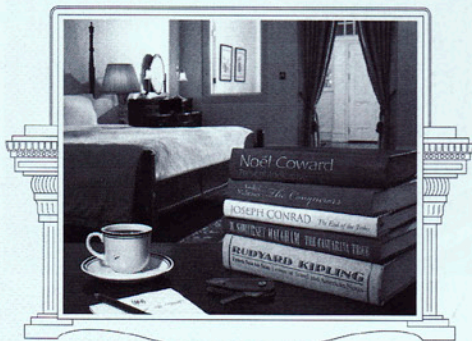
lightful minutes eating thick slices of tangy sourdough and deciding among more than 200 items on the voluminous à la carte menu, which includes 19 fish and seafood dishes, 14 different steaks and chops and nearly 70 other miscellaneous entrées. Liz goes with the avocado cocktail, roasted

lamb with mint jelly and mashed potatoes. I settle on the lettuce and tomato salad, the milk-fed veal cutlet (sorry, PETA), mashed potatoes and peas.

The service, as always, is flawless. The red-jacketed, black-bow-tied, white-shirted, black-trousered waiters aren't

Photograph: Orange County Register

## A stay at Raffles has always been something to write home about.



They came from all over, by steamship, by horse-drawn carriages and in time, by air. Royalty, celebrity and the talented descended upon Raffles Hotel. No effort was spared to ensure their comfort and pleasure. Little wonder then, that residents not only left with fond memories of their stay, but immortalised the hotel in their writing. Stroll along our corridors today and you may notice some of their names on the doors. A collection of Personality Suites pay homage to renowned visitors such as Somerset Maugham, Noel Coward, Rudyard Kipling and James Michener; each luxuriously appointed to reflect the distinct character of its illustrious resident. Indeed, you may find them worth writing home about too.

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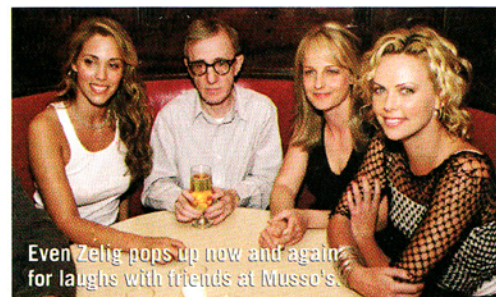
would-be actors waiting for their big break. These men take pride in what they do. They are consummate professionals and, as such, they are sublimely unobtrusive, feeling no need to burden us with the knowledge of their first names.

With coffee and dessert (unmemorable bread-and-butter pudding, but then sweets are not what one comes to Musso's for), the bill with tip comes to \$155, plus a \$20 bar tab. Not inexpensive, but it was obvious from how stuffed we felt as we walked to the car that we'd gotten carried away with the excitement

of being back in our favorite restaurant. Order reasonably and expect to pay considerably less. The last quarter-century has seen the demise of dozens of classic

industry lunch spot and preheater evening destination, its history imbues it with a kind of meta-coolness that transcends the ephemeral hipness of whatever the

**The service is flawless. Red-jacketed, bow-tied, white-shirted, black-trousered waiters aren't would-be actors waiting for their big break. These men take pride in what they do.**



Even Zelig pops up now and again for laughs with friends at Musso's.

L.A. eateries, among them Chasen's, the Brown Derby, Scandia, Schwab's drugstore, the Nickodell and all three Ship's coffee shops (with their toasters at every table). The links to old Hollywood are slowly fading away, and fans of Musso's can be excused for living in dread of the day they hear that it has met with a similar fate. "Every year I keep thinking, 'It's over, it's going to close,'" says Stephan Bataillard.

Still, Musso's remains a favorite

hot restaurant of the moment happens to be, and the crowd at the bar and dearth of empty booths on this Tuesday night—a night when there's not even a show at the Pantages Theatre down the street—should calm those devotees who, come 2019, hope to celebrate the Musso and Frank Grill's centennial.

Bataillard sums it up: "I feel safe here." •

*Musso & Frank Grill, 6667 Hollywood Blvd.; (323) 467-7788 or (323) 467-5123. Open 11 a.m. to 11 p.m.; closed Sunday and Monday.*