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The Groucho Club a brief biography

London of the late seventies/early eighties would be barely recognisable to the modern gourmand. A few bistros had appeared serving 'foreign' food, but Modern British cooking and Gastro Pubs were years away. The pubs were mostly smoky dives where the only food on offer was a jar of pickled eggs and members clubs were viciously stratified by class – working men got working men's clubs and the upper classes got gentlemen's clubs. The latter were often fine, but fading buildings stained with generations of port, cigars and discrimination. The winds of sexual equality could only eddy around Pall Mall, but things were about to change...

At the Frankfurt Book Fair a group of British publishers, agents and writers were bemusing the fact that as, once again, the Garrick had recently refused women there was nowhere they could convene in London that wasn't a public space. The group of around fifteen including [Louis Baum](#), [Matthew Evans](#), [Carmen Callil](#), [Ed Victor](#), [Liz Calder](#) and [Michael Sissons](#) outlined a document for their ideal meeting, working and socialising place and called it The Groucho Club.

The name is from an oft misquoted line by Groucho Marx of the Marx Brothers comedy group, that seems to be: 'I sent the club a wire stating, "PLEASE ACCEPT MY RESIGNATION. I DON'T WANT TO BELONG TO ANY CLUB THAT WILL ACCEPT PEOPLE LIKE ME AS A MEMBER'. The literary group's document got to [Tony Mackintosh](#) who had previously established Dingwalls Dance Hall in Camden Lock, a members bar in Covent Garden called The Zanzibar and had just opened seminal Notting Hill restaurant 192. The Zanzibar was a nice place to go and have a drink and customers might be fairly confident the person sitting next to them at the bar was someone they would be interested in talking to. Also its membership status meant The Zanzibar was allowed a late license – a big incentive in the days of draconian licensing laws.

Tony had been working with wine merchant [John Armit](#) and architect [Tchaik Chassay](#) on previous projects and as partners they looked through the proposal and agreed there was something in this club idea, so Tony got on his bike and cycled off to find the premises.

London's Soho is an area boxed in between the impressive Oxford St, Regents St, Charing Cross Rd, and Shaftesbury Avenue. A patchwork of narrow streets, Soho has for many, many years harboured London's 'red light district'. Notorious for its own 'gentleman's establishments', illegal drinking and dancing clubs of the 1950's and then the arrival of Italian coffee shops, Soho was a known for its mix of seedy and bohemian.

The large stucco fronted 'townhouse' at 45 Dean Street had been a restaurant since 1880, but the building is perhaps most famous as Gennaro's. Here such luminaries as the Kings of Greece, Yugoslavia and Siam dined alongside Caruso and Dame Nellie Melba. Gennaro would greet his guests at the door and present each female diner with a red rose. After Gennaro's demise, although it remained an Italian restaurant, 45 Dean Street fell into disrepair and there was little proof of its glamorous past when The Groucho Club arrived in 1984. The now famous Dining Room with its beautiful vaulted roof and glass ceiling was 'hidden' in what was a storeroom. There were also tales of dark deeds at and around Gennaro's, including a fatal shooting – allegedly in what is now the Gennaro Room, which is reportedly haunted – this was the natural home of the new club.

The building cost £450,000 for the freehold and they would need the same again to transform the rundown Gennaro's into a presentable and functioning operation. Despite this seeming a modest amount of money now, Tony found no interest for the project in the City. So he went back to the literary '15' and they decided to pool their address books and create an unorthodox financial prospectus, complete with cartoons by Quentin Blake, and sent it out to all their friends and associates.

The premise was simple a members club that was open to men *and* women and would provide a modern version of the traditional establishments. One of the tenets was – and it may seem extraordinary now – that a woman could sit alone at the bar and have an alcoholic drink without being considered, or indeed treated as a prostitute. There would be a bar, restaurants and later reasonably priced bedrooms for country members to stay 'in Town', all with personalised service for a regular crowd of like-minded people.

The proposal clearly touched a nerve and after some polite hectoring the final cheques arrived on the morning of the deadline, as Tony Mackintosh said: "It was a great moment as we knew we could go ahead and attempt to create the dream we had expressed in the introduction to the prospectus 'Every Blue Moon.. London's social and cultural life...'"

Around four hundred publishers, theatrical and media types put their hands in their pockets to create this new club. The premises were secured, renovation work was undertaken, the cellar filled with wine and the kitchens and bars staffed. On 5th of May 1985 The Groucho Club officially opened its doors for the first time.

It seems there was hardly a stampede in those early days and the first year was a nerve-wracking time for the fledgling company, however Tony Mackintosh and his cohorts were confident that its strengths would win through. Like The Zanzibar, membership club status meant that the Groucho could offer daytime and, most importantly, a late night license to sell alcohol. This soon attracted the post-show punters, actors and of course committed drinkers. Also in the late 1980's lunch was very much not for wimps. It was not uncommon to take a different wine with each course and even a bottle of Port with cheese. Then as lunch naturally segued into the evening instead of being tutted at by impatient waiters, Groucho Club members simply repaired to the comfortably upholstered bar and were able to continue unmolested until the 1am license officially ran out.

Members were always expected to act with courtesy to staff and other members, but apart from that were allowed to enjoy themselves. People in the know realised this was a place to see and be seen and applications for membership increased. The Membership Committee was formed and selection was decided by simple rules: The applicant would have to be proposed and seconded by two members 'in good standing'. The general rule being 'would you like this person sitting next to you at the bar'?

By the 1990's The Groucho Club was firmly established as the premier watering hole for the famous and infamous and of course (like any bar with bedrooms!) some tales of excess arose, and, as many of the clientele were celebrities, it was inevitable the notoriety of the Club would spread. The Groucho was seen as the inner sanctum to the media élite where all the deals were being done.

The Groucho Club has been a long time supporter of art and artists. Exhibitions were, and still are, staged at the Club, with the artist donating a piece to the collection by way of payment. Soon the walls and membership were swelled with artists and art world figures. The Groucho Club Director of Art [Nicky Carter](#) (an artist herself) now presides over an impressive collection.

The Groucho Club and ex-MD [Mary-Lou Sturridge](#) helped found the Streetsmart charity that adds one pound to each customer's bill in the run up to Christmas to aid the homeless. To help collect for this the Groucho Gang Show was created Although originally performed by the staff the members soon got involved and the event grew into a fearsome array of talent. Performers have included: [Chrissie Hynde](#), [UB40](#), [Heaven 17](#), [Roland Gift](#), [Annie Lennox](#) and [Babysambles](#).

As The Groucho Club grew in stature and success so other members clubs were created in its image. Most were media-based and indeed one was allegedly formed simply for rejected Groucho applicants. The Groucho Club was a PLC listed on the AIM market and was in profit for a number of years; as such it soon attracted potential buyers. After a clumsy takeover attempt by Benjy Fry in 2000, a genuine sale to a conglomerate of [Joel Cadbury](#), [Matthew Freud](#) and [Rupert Hambro](#) followed the next year. After the fragmentation of that group Joel Cadbury sold the club in 2008 to current owners Graphite Capital.

The Membership now exceeds four thousand, including many of the original founder investors. It has associations and reciprocals with members clubs from New York to Hong Kong and intends to maintain its position as the most desirable media members club in – well – the World.

Says General Manager [June McCluskey](#):

'This year, we celebrated our 25th Anniversary as London's original contemporary private members club. Over the years the Club has attracted a diverse mix of creative members forming a truly unique atmosphere, but we simply like them to think of The Groucho Club as their second home.'