

"Give them good food, and they'll recognize it": Maxim's Introduces Fine Dining to Houston

By Mark E. Young



Camille Bermann attends to guests at Maxim's in the 1950s.

All photos and images courtesy of the Hospitality Industry Archives, Massad Research Center, Hilton College, University of Houston.

In 1949, amid the city's booming economy and population growth, the Peacock Grill opened—giving Houstonians a new kind of culinary experience. Max Manuel and Camille Bermann opened their fine dining establishment in downtown Houston filling the niche for continental cuisine. The name was soon changed to Maxim's, and a Houston legend was born. Bermann based the new name and the design concept on the world-renowned restaurant Maxim's de Paris. For over fifty years, Maxim's provided sophisticated food and dining to its loyal patrons, introducing Houstonians to fine French cuisine and wine.

In its December 1999 issue devoted to the best of Texas in the twentieth century, *Texas Monthly* food critic Patricia Sharpe described Maxim's as the "Restaurant of the Century." The restaurant earned this distinction in large part because of proprietor Camille Bermann's legendary demand for perfection in food, wine, and service. Born and raised in Luxembourg, he trained in Brussels learning to make pastries; soon he was working at the Ritz in Paris. In 1939-1940, under the tutelage of Henri Soule, Bermann travelled to the United States to work at Le Pavillion restaurant in the French Pavilion at the New York World's Fair. By

Doorman Will Park Your Car No Charge

A Dinner Without Wine?

IS LIKE A HUNTER WITHOUT SHELLS

MAXIM'S DINING ROOM

IS LIKE A LION WITHOUT COURAGE

TABLE D'HOTE DINNER
(Choice of Appetizer)
Hot Hors D' Oeuvres \$1.00 Extra

Oysters Rockefeller \$1.00 Extra Oysters Bouerguione \$1.00 Extra
Smoked Salmon Mariniered Herring Tarama ala Camille
Crabmeat Cocktail Shrimp Remoulade Fruit Cocktail
Hors D' Oeuvres Parisienne Half Baked Grapefruit
Chilled Tomato or Grapefruit Juice
Snails Bourguione \$1.00 Extra
"or" Soup
Split Pea Soup French Onion Seafood Gumbo

(Choice of Entree)

Lobster Thermidor \$4.50
Broiled Individual Flounder 3.75
Stuffed Flounder 4.50
Pompano en Papillote 4.75
Red Snapper Sante Pontchartrain 4.50
Poached Trout Marguery 4.75
Sweet Breads Sante au Madera 4.25
Whole Roast Capon—Cherries and Wild Rice—Serves two 9.50
Breast of Chicken Marie Christine 4.75
Breast of Chicken Monte Carlo 4.75
Squab Chicken Camille 4.75
Stuffed Squab Chicken Rozzini 4.75
Breast of Chicken Marie Antoinette 4.75
Sliced Turkey Rochambeau 4.50
French Double Lamb Chop 5.00
Ham Steak Grand Duc-Poaches and Cherries 4.50
Roast Prime Rib of Beef au Jus 4.75
Prime Sirloin Steak 6.25
Pheasant Chicken With Wild Rice—Serves Two 12.00

(Included)
Potatoes Salad Vegetable

(Dessert)
Coffee, Vanilla or Peppermint Ice Cream Rainbow Parfait
Coeur au Marron (Chestnuts and Ice Cream) Pineapple Sherbet
Peach Melba Maxim's Cheese Cake Baba au Rhum \$1.00 Extra
Assorted Cheese

(Drink)
Coffee Tea Milk

BAKED ALASKA FOR TWO \$3.00 EXTRA

APERITIF—RHINE WINE AND GRENADINE—80c
PATE DE FOIS GRAS—\$5.00
BELUGA CAVIAR—\$3.00

Your Favorite Foods Will Be Prepared At Your Request

IS LIKE A HUMORIST WITHOUT WIT

IS LIKE A HEART WITHOUT LOVE

IS A CRIMINAL OFFENSE

responsible for Lost Articles



Camille Bermann, who was born and raised in Luxembourg, is pictured at the beginning of his career in 1933.

this time, the twenty-five-year-old Bermann had a lifetime of experiences that he eventually shared with Houston.

The outbreak of World War II interrupted Bermann's plans to return to Europe. With his culinary and service training, he quickly found employment, first in New York, then in New Orleans as head of foodservice at the Beverly Country Club, an establishment with a colorful gambling reputation. In the meantime, Bermann met and married his life partner Lisl, and the couple soon had two boys, Ronnie and Mark.

In 1946, Bermann moved to Galveston, Texas, where he worked as dining room captain of the Balinese Room. He then came to Houston with the Peacock Room in 1949. With the rechristening of Maxim's, culinary history was in the making.

Bermann tried to recreate the flavor of France in his restaurant. The cuisine included favorites like lobster thermidor, poached trout marguery, and desserts like cherries jubilee and peach melba. However, Bermann realized that not all of his customers had an appetite for French cuisine and always offered dishes that included more traditional local offerings, a minute steak with sauce or a prime sirloin steak.

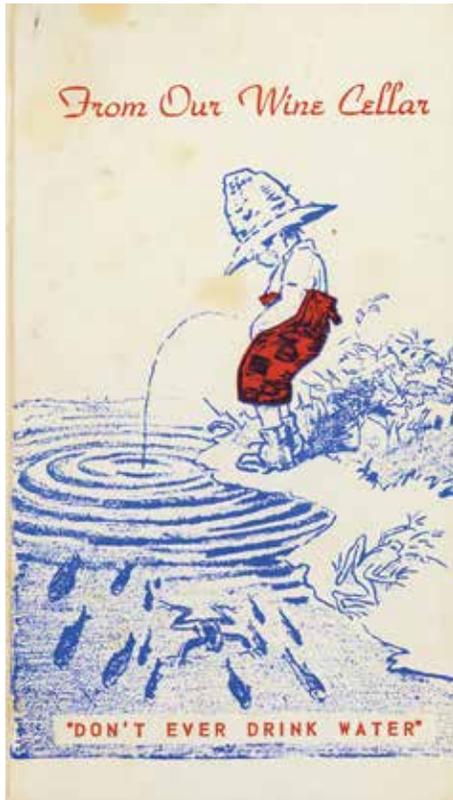
Matching the food was the quality of the wine selection. Credited with introducing fine wine to the palates of generations of Texans, Maxim's had the largest wine collection in Houston with 70,000-80,000 bottles and was the first local restaurant to offer fine wines such as Châteauneuf-du-Pape, Château Margaux, Château Mouton-Rothschild, and Louis Roederer. By this time, Maxim's had moved next to the downtown Foley's department store; and in typical Bermann can-do spirit, he created Houston's first wine cellar, or perhaps wine room, built into a corner of the Foley's parking garage.

This section of Maxim's menu shows Camille Bermann's flair for eccentricity. Read the menu to find his answers to the question, "A Dinner Without Wine? Is..."



Camille Bermann's identification card from the World's Fair in 1939-1940 that took place in New York City.

Bermann, ever the showman, turned the restrictive Texas liquor license law of mid-twentieth century Texas to his benefit. Restaurants in Texas had to issue memberships to diners, usually for a nominal fee, for alcohol consumption. Bermann, often with flourish, issued memberships to the exclusive Maxim's wine room, but to favored patrons, he issued membership card number "1." Over time many of Maxim's most loyal customers discovered they all shared membership card "1"!



The wine list for Maxim's demonstrates Bermann's sense of humor.

Bermann instinctually knew what would please his restaurant patrons. The fine wine and French cuisine were the most important ingredients, but his flair for showmanship also won the favor of his customers. One example comes in his tough taskmaster attitude toward the waitresses. Yes, Bermann much preferred women to men in the service department. Patrons often heard him scolding waitresses or imploring them to maintain the impeccable service that Maxim's was known for. These public reprimands often resulted in large tips for the waitresses. In fact, Bermann's public displays did not result in a high turnover rate, with his employees often averaging more than twenty-five years of service.

The other key ingredient to the success of Maxim's was the city of Houston. In 1949, Houston already had a decade of transformative growth that had only accelerated since the end of World War II. The development and concentration of the petroleum industry in Houston brought new people

to the city daily. These people had food tastes that went beyond the Texas meat-and-potatoes standard. Oil industry executives, who traveled across the nation and around the world, developed a taste for fine cuisine. Under Bermann's direction, Maxim's educated its patrons and laid the foundation for the future expansion of Houston's vibrant fine dining selections.

In 1981 the restaurant moved to Greenway Plaza, and ten years later upon Camille's death, his son Ronnie assumed Maxim's leadership. With plans for renovation, the restaurant was sold and the new owners closed it in 2001, but it never reopened. Nevertheless, Maxim's legacy lives on in the many fine dining establishments that have opened their doors in Houston—following in the footsteps of Camille Bermann.



Camille and his wife Lisl.

The Maxim's collection can be found in the Hospitality Industry Archives, a part of the Massad Family Research Center located in the Conrad N. Hilton College of Hotel and Restaurant Management at the University of Houston. The repository maintains a host of collections devoted to the culinary history of Houston, Texas, and the world. Hours of operation are 8:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m., Monday through Friday.

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The **Hospitality Industry Archives** includes the following collections with a strong Houston component:

- Les Amis D' Escoffier Society of Houston Collection
- Erik J. Worscheh Collection
- Harry L. Chambers Collection
- George Fuermann Wine Talk Collection
- Houston Restaurant Association Women's Auxiliary Collection
- Mary K. Kilburn Collection
- Sonny Look Collection

To visit the University of Houston Digital Library's collection of 1850s and 1860s hotel and restaurant menus from the Hospitality Industry Archives, go to <http://digital.lib.uh.edu/collection/p15195coll34>.