



Written by [Ralph R. Reiland](#) on December 14, 2010

A Special Place: Elaine's

It wasn't the flavor of her lasagna or the shabby section of town where her restaurant was located that made Elaine Kaufman into a legendary celebrity. What Elaine Edna Kaufman from the Bronx created was a community of interesting people. In an age of excessive controls and isolation, a time when new homes are built without front porches and cafeteria workers get sued for calling customers "honey," she created a special gathering space, a place where characters were appreciated, a place where a managerial ethos hadn't snuffed out the last remnants of surprise, and rough edges were still permitted to flourish.



In 2003, the New York Landmarks Conservancy named Kaufman a "Living Legend."

"New York City dining doyenne Elaine Kaufman died Friday at the age of 81 from complications of emphysema," reported CNN on December 4. "As proprietor of the eponymous Elaine's restaurant on Manhattan's Upper East Side, since 1963, she held court nightly over a star-studded scene ..."

Kaufman started out selling stamps at Gimbels and checking hats and selling cigars at the Progressive Era Political Club in Greenwich Village. Boyfriend Alfredo Viazzi, an aspiring writer, introduced Kaufman to the restaurant business at Portofino, his café in Greenwich Village, a popular hangout for writers and theater people.

Viazzi says Ms. Kaufman "took my pots and pans" when the relationship ended and she opened her own restaurant for \$10,000.

The writers followed Kaufman. The welcoming new proprietress provided running tabs for the oft-times broke authors struggling to finish their first books or pitching free lance articles in order to pay the rent.

"Poor bastards," she said in an interview last year with John Heilpern for *Vanity Fair*, referring to writers. "I like their minds."

"One writer who ran up a considerable tab eventually went into the bakery business and tried to pay her back in ganache cakes," reported Heilpern. "Another regular, Winston Groom, owed several thousand dollars, then wrote *Forrest Gump* and happily settled his debt."

Jackie Kennedy preferred a table in the back with Onassis. "She sent Caroline and John over for dinner when they were teenagers and said, 'Look after them. Send me the bill,'" explained Kaufman.

A table in the corridor was saved for Woody Allen most nights, no reservation necessary. Her standard line if a newcomer asked for directions to the men's room: "Make a right at Woody Allen."

"I'm very lucky," Kaufman told Heilpern. "I get to go out seven nights a week and meet a lot of people I happen to like. How bad is that?"



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Writing in 2005 that “there is no one even vaguely like her,” Liz Smith summed up Kaufman: “The owner of this unpretentious spot is a big-hearted closet intellectual, a sexy charmer and a red-hot plump and powerful mama, who isn’t a pushover and who is, indeed, a hard taskmaster for phonies and fakes. If she is your friend, you hardly need other friends. If you misbehave around her, she could throw your ass right out into the street.”

In 1998, a marketing executive sued her for \$12 million. He’d ordered one drink to split with his companion. Ms. Kaufman allegedly said, “You people look to me like poor white trash.” He claimed Kaufman then slapped him in the face. She denied it all, saying just that he got in her face.

The litigious customer didn’t get the \$12 million jackpot. “Time was when men were men,” Kaufman said last year in the *Vanity Fair* interview. “Now they call a lawyer and sue you.”

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