



Preserving a 90-Year-Old Restaurant

An Interview with
Dean Poll, Owner, Gallagher's Steakhouse



Loeb Boathouse at Central Park (left); Gallagher's Steakhouse (above)

EDITORS' NOTE Dean Poll was born and raised on Long Island, New York, in a family with a long line of famous food personalities and restaurateurs. In the mid '70s, while working full-time with his father and brothers in a midtown Manhattan restaurant, Poll recognized the influence purchasing had on the quality and profitability of any fine restaurant. After working with their father in New York City, Poll and his brothers came back to Long Island in



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1980 and purchased a defunct property, renaming it Pappas after their father's restaurant in Brooklyn. In the mid-'80s, Poll and his brothers purchased Manero's in Roslyn, turning it into a prime steakhouse and adjacent butcher shop that is now known as Bryant & Cooper. In 2000, Poll took on his most ambitious project. He sought to make his mark on Manhattan with the contract for the Loeb Boathouse in Central Park. He became the sole proprietor of the Boathouse and painstakingly restored it to its glory as one of New York's most beloved, successful and visited institutions. During the process of restoring the famous Loeb Boathouse, Poll sought to identify other famous New York institutions in need of similar restoration. In January 2013, Poll acquired the legendary Gallagher's Steakhouse (gallaghersnysteakhouse.com) on 52nd Street and Broadway from Marlene Brody, the widow of famous restaurateur, Jerome Brody. The famed steakhouse and speakeasy was founded in 1927 by Ziegfeld Follies dancer Helen Gallagher.

Will you highlight the history and heritage of Gallagher's?

Gallagher's has been in business since 1927. I owned the Boathouse and was looking to expand. I figured you couldn't build a 90-year-old restaurant, so bringing Gallagher's back to its glory was a great opportunity. I knew that Jerry Brody, a great restaurateur and owner of Gallagher's, had passed away. In 2007, I tried buying the restaurant from his widow, but she wasn't interested in selling it at that time. About five years later, she called me about something unrelated, and I asked, "How about Gallagher's?" She told me that there was a French group that were interested in buying it and I decided it was time to go after it again.

We negotiated for about a year and I was offering her a very good deal. She was hesitant until I told her, "If you were my mother, I would urge you to take what is being offered."

At the time of the purchase, the restaurant was in tremendous disrepair since no investment had been made in it for years. It had a certain charm, and I had a vision for it. I bought it on February 1st of 2013 and I closed the restaurant on July 9th of 2013. We reopened it on February 10th of 2014.

It had a good foundation but needed to be cleaned up. I'd rather describe what we did as a restoration rather than a renovation. However, we did replace the floors, the ceiling and added complete new kitchens. Today, it looks more like a well-preserved 90-year old restaurant. We matched what people's perception of Gallagher's was, a speakeasy, vibrant restaurant from the '40s and '50s and "Mad Men" steakhouse of the '60s. We accomplished turning that perception into a reality.

How important is it to continue to innovate the Gallagher's menu while still offering the staples that the restaurant is known for?

You have to have your steaks, potatoes and creamed spinach. It is also important to offer a selection of items to differentiate yourself from the other steakhouses. We do that with tuna, and salmon tartare, as well as a few Italian influenced dishes, such as burrata with roasted peppers, clams casino and oreganata, just to name a few.

You must have your foundation of steaks and chops that people expect, mixed with offerings that are a little more contemporary and perhaps unexpected.

How critical is it to attract and retain talent, especially in an industry that is known for high turnover?

Right now, in New York, labor is the biggest challenge. When we took over Gallagher's, we had several people on our team that had been there for decades. They are now known as the veterans. Then we have our newer team members who provide a great balance.

How challenging is it to make a restaurant financially viable in a city like New York?

The expenses of running a restaurant have become very excessive. Between the linen, the cost of labor, occupancy costs, the cost of water, the taxes – I could go on and on – it has become very difficult. I have a saying "The biggest expense of business is no business." Even if a restaurant is full, some are just not big enough to do the amount of business needed to be able to pay for all these expenses.

We're very fortunate that our 300-seat restaurant is busy every day.

How do you define Gallagher's target market?

I think people are people, everyone likes to eat, and everyone likes entertainment. You hear a lot of talk about the millennials having meals delivered to their offices and apartments with Uber Eats and all these different apps. Coming to a restaurant like Gallagher's is entertaining. There's the eating aspect of it and there's the entertainment aspect of it. The surroundings of Gallagher's are warm and comfortable. There are a lot of restaurants out there that are very nice, but they're not necessarily comfortable.

Gallagher's is a joint. It's a fun place. There are a lot of steakhouses that are built with polished wood and brass and look like a lawyer's office. Gallagher's is a place that a lot of younger people find fun and they enjoy the music that we play, atmosphere that they are dining in and the diversity of the people dining here.

Do you see growth opportunities for the Gallagher's brand?

There is a Gallagher's franchise in Atlantic City, and in Las Vegas. We have had inquiries about other locations and are considering some. However, in addition to the Boathouse, I just opened with my partner, Tom Fanning, a PDQ franchise in Farmingdale on Long Island. So, you ask me what is PDQ? It means People Dedicated to Quality, and is a chicken sandwich and chicken tender restaurant based out of Tampa founded by Bob Basham, one of the founders of Outback Steakhouse. Having opened our first, we have secured another location in Westbury and a third in Commack. I like having the diversity of restaurants, Gallagher's Steakhouse catering to the New York business community as well as tourists, the Central Park Boathouse, which is seasonal and is a concession of the City of New York, and now a quick-serve restaurant offering a quality product with a nine-and-a-half-dollar average check. ●