

Broadway's New Heated Rivalry: Two Diners With Singing Waiters

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Singing show tunes and slinging meals at the new Diner24 and the old mainstay Ellen's Stardust Diner.Credit...By Cole Saladino For The New York Times

Ellen's Stardust Diner, where the staff has been belting show tunes for decades, faces fresh competition from a 24-hour newcomer just a block away.

The setting: Broadway. The cast: an accomplished star and a fame-hungry ingénue. The stakes: acclaim, a big audience and boffo box office.

If that sounds like the plot of "[All About Eve](#)," it is. But it also describes the latest drama unfolding in Manhattan's theater district, where a heated rivalry is brewing between restaurants a block from each other on Broadway: the long-running tourist attraction [Ellen's Stardust Diner](#) (at 51st Street) and the just-opened [Diner24](#) (at 52nd Street).

Both serve American blue-plate comforts like burgers, shakes and all-day breakfasts. Both are diners with vinyl seating and other hallmarks of 1950s style. Both cater mostly to a Times Square demographic: tourists, theatergoers and families.

Image



Since 1987, servers have doubled as the entertainment at Ellen's Stardust Diner in Manhattan's theater district. Credit... Cole Saladino for The New York Times

But it's another piece of DNA they share — waiters who break into song between taking orders and serving food — that has the rialto buzzing.

Since 1987, servers at Ellen's (nicknamed the Stardusters) have been singing for patrons polishing off pancakes just steps away. As of last Thursday, Ellen's has competition from Diner24, where waiters are also belting 11 o'clock numbers and power ballads. Starting Oct. 19, they'll do so 24 hours a day.

On Monday, Diner24 held auditions. Thirty performers, culled from 300 emails, jockeyed for six new positions that require a trifecta of talents: vocal chops, waiting experience and skill at moving gracefully around a room.

It's too early to know whether this new show will upstage Ellen's. But last month, [The New York Post reported](#) that Ellen Hart, the owner of Ellen's, was "furious" that the veteran New York City restaurateur [Stratis Morfogen](#) had opened a similar place nearby. The article also quoted an unnamed Ellen's "HR exec" who urged employees "to revisit the Company's conflicts of interest policy."

Translation: You can't work the matinee at Ellen's, then do the evening show at Diner24.

Image

Diner24, which also features singer-servers, opened last week, just a block away from Ellen's Stardust Diner. Credit...Cole Saladino for The New York Times

Image

Kennen Butler recently auditioned to be a singer-server at Diner24. Credit...Cole Saladino for The New York Times

In an interview last week outside her restaurant, Ms. Hart, 85, did not seem worried. "Obviously they did something similar," she said. "But you know what? That's competition."

Asked about the restaurant's warning to the staff about noncompetition, she sounded like a seasoned Broadway producer schooling an amateur on how show business works. "That was in their packet when we first hired them," she said.

Not much has changed at Ellen's since Ms. Hart — a Queens native who was named a [Miss Subways](#) in 1959 — opened it next to Broadway's Winter Garden Theater, then home to "Cats." Digital signs in the dining room remind customers that it's the "Home of the Original World Famous Singing Waitstaff."

Image

Ellen Hart, the owner of Ellen's Stardust Diner. Credit...Cole Saladino for The New York Times

Around 6 p.m. on Thursday, a line for a table stretched down the block. Inside the packed space, servers hustled plates of nachos and “Rocky Horror Show”-themed milkshakes to tables on two levels. From the mezzanine, little cannons shot confetti that coated heads and waffle fries alike.

The biggest smile in the room radiated from Julie Binns, who had arrived in New York that morning from Manchester, England. She was there with her friend Angie White. “We’ve only had one margarita, and already it’s been incredible,” Ms. Binns shouted over a song from the musical “The Great Gatsby,” which is playing just up the block.

Performers at Ellen’s sing to recorded instrumental tracks almost nonstop from 7 a.m. until midnight, every day of the year. The playlist on this night was mostly show tunes (like “This Is the Moment” from “Jekyll & Hyde”), but included pop songs (“Empire State of Mind”). Ms. Hart herself worked the room with “I Could Have Danced All Night,” from “My Fair Lady.”

The M.C., [Chris Mauro](#), said one way Ellen’s employees can moonlight is by auditioning for theater gigs.

“I audition in the mornings and I come here and I wait tables at night,” said Mr. Mauro, who has acted in regional theater and on cruise ships. Employees, he added, “get to go away and do shows and have this place to come back to, which is always wonderful. But the goal and hope is Broadway.”

Image

Among the patrons at Ellen’s Stardust Diner recently was Julie Binns, far right, who was visiting from Manchester, England.Credit...Cole Saladino for The New York Times

Image

The menu at Ellen’s focuses on diner classics like burgers, a cheesesteak and waffle fries.Credit...Cole Saladino for The New York Times

Later that night, it was a different story at Diner24. Lindsay Johr, a former manager at Ellen’s, climbed atop an illuminated, red-carpeted stage on the second floor and sang the “Phantom of the Opera” ballad “Think of Me” to an audience of just four customers.

Two of them were Mike O’Brien and his girlfriend, Macie Perkins, visiting from Boston. “Hadestown” tickets were too expensive, they said, so they wandered Times Square before deciding to eat at Diner24, unaware that there would be a show. (They had never heard of Ellen’s).

“It’s amazing how talented people are just waiting to be discovered here,” said Mr. O’Brien, a tour guide and comedian, as he paused from eating a chicken quesadilla he deemed “divine.” “Maybe we’ll see the next Hugh Jackman.”

Evan Jennings, a server who sang “Waving Through a Window” from “Dear Evan Hansen,” said he welcomed “any opportunity to perform,” whether at a diner or onstage. Like many of the cast at Ellen’s and Diner24, he has worked regionally — recently in [“Dear Evan Hansen”](#) in Austin, Texas — but has yet to make it to Broadway. “I’d love to be in ‘The Outsiders,’” he said.

The diner’s owner, Mr. Morfogen, 58, seemed unfazed by the near-empty dining room. He said he had barely promoted the restaurant’s soft opening in late September because “you’ve got to open up in stages.” (He operates another Diner24, without entertainment, in the Gramercy Park neighborhood.)

Image

Stratis Morfogen, the owner of Diner24, runs another location in Gramercy Park that does not have entertainment.Credit...Cole Saladino for The New York Times

Diners are a world he knows well. Growing up on Long Island, he worked for a time at a Queens diner that his Greek father ran every day “like it was his first day on the job.”

Mr. Morfogen said that until recently he had never heard of Ellen’s. He dismissed any suggestion that he was a copycat.

“Does she have a monopoly on a microphone?” he said.

Why open so close by? Mr. Morfogen cited heavy foot traffic, a need for 24-hour dining in Times Square and the desire to give foreign tourists a uniquely American dining experience. He also cited the thirst he saw on social media for “diner culture.”

“We’re not in the restaurant business anymore,” he said, pointing to an Instagram-ready towering milkshake topped with a fat slice of cake. “We’re in the reaction business.”

Diner24 has some competitive advantages over Ellen’s, at least for now. There’s no wait to get in. Its [menu](#) is much bigger. Diner24 has outdoor seating and offers delivery; Ellen’s has neither.

Image

Mr. Morfogen is hopeful that his towering milkshakes topped with slices of cake will go viral.Credit...Cole Saladino for The New York Times

The biggest difference is that there's no show on Diner24's first floor. Upstairs, performers sing in 15-minute sets twice every hour, providing quiet time to have conversations without raising your voice. At Ellen's, the music never stops. And it can get loud.

What Ellen's has over Diner24 — besides legs and buzz — are bragging rights. Ellen's, said Ms. Binns, "is just one of those things you do in New York."

As for any bad blood between the two owners, Mr. Morfogen said he recently ate at Ellen's, and on the way out the restaurant's artistic director recognized him and welcomed him to Times Square.

"I said, 'I want to invite you guys when we do friends and family,'" Mr. Morfogen said. "I want to be a good neighbor."