

ELLEN HART

The Heart Behind Ellen’s Stardust Diner
By Patricia Canole



There are New Yorkers, and then there are New York institutions. Ellen Hart Sturm is both. The founder and owner of *Ellen’s Stardust Diner* the beloved, boisterous, burger-and-Broadway landmark on Broadway spent more than six decades weaving herself into the fabric of New York City. From a teenage beauty queen riding the city’s subway lines as a pin-up model, to a savvy restaurateur who turned a retro diner concept into one of the most famous eateries in the world, Ellen Hart’s story is as vivid and improbable as New York itself.

MISS SUBWAYS 1959

Ellen Hart’s story begins in Queens, New York, where a young girl was already consumed by the performing arts. Acting, singing, and speech lessons filled her spare time, and her ambitions were on the stage. In the spring of 1959, during her senior year, she entered her photograph into a competition that would change the course of her life. She was selected as Miss Subways, a long-running beauty pageant that plastered the winners’ faces across the trains of the New York City subway system.

Being named Miss Subways was no small thing. The promotion, which later served as inspiration for the character Miss Turnstile in the classic New York musical *On the Town*, was a genuine launchpad for aspiring performers. For Ellen, it opened doors to a singing, acting, and modeling career that would define her early adult life. She sang the national anthem at New York Rangers and New York Knicks games, performed in the all-city chorus, and pursued her craft with relentless dedication.

But show business, as Ellen would be the first to tell you, is hard. Determined to channel her creativity into something more certain, she pivoted not away from performance, but toward a world where performance and business could coexist. That world turned out to be the restaurant industry, and Ellen Hart has never looked back.

A DOWNTOWN INSTITUTION

Then in 1979, a now-married Ellen and her husband, Irving Sturm, decided to open *Ellen’s Café* in Lower Manhattan – directly

across from City Hall. What began as a coffee shop with a bakery quickly became something far more significant: a gathering place for the city’s political class and New Yorkers alike every day. Mayors walked through the door with regularity, starting with Abe Beame and continuing through successive administrations, often donating pies to charity on their birthdays. The cafe became so beloved that it developed its own culture of whimsy, offering “instant marriage receptions” for newlyweds who had just exchanged vows at City Hall.

Ellen also made history at the cafe in a quieter way: she was the first restaurateur in New York City and possibly the entire country to champion designated smoking and non-smoking sections, doing so in 1979, years before it became standard practice. It was a small but telling sign of her forward-thinking instincts.

The cafe thrived for decades, but its run on Chambers Street ended when the building’s landlord opted for a condo conversion around 2001, just before 9/11. Ellen and Irving took it in stride. They had already been exploring other ideas.

EVERYTHING CHANGED

The seeds of *Ellen’s Stardust Diner* had been planted a few years earlier, inspired by a trip Ellen took to a retro-style restaurant in Southern California. She came home convinced that New York needed something similar. She thought a 1950s-themed diner filled with Elvis photographs, kitschy decor, and the nostalgic warmth of a bygone era. She and Irving opened their first *Stardust* on Sixth Avenue in Midtown, and while it didn’t yet feature a singing waitstaff, it established the aesthetic and the atmosphere.

In 1995, they relocated to their current and iconic address at 51st Street and Broadway, right in the heart of Times Square and that’s when Ellen had the idea that would make the *Stardust* legendary. “Waiters traditionally want to be singers and actors,” she said. The logic was irresistible: why not give aspiring Broadway performers a real stage, a real audience, and a real paycheck, all at the same time? The concept of

Stardusters is a revolving cast of talented singer-waiters who perform for diners between taking orders; it put the diner on the map. Immediately.

MEET THE STARDUSTERS

Today, *Ellen’s Stardust Diner* can pack in as many as 3,500 customers in a single day. On any given afternoon, lines snake halfway down West 51st Street, filled with tourists, theater lovers, families, and regulars who have been coming for years. Inside the 200-seat space, the Stardusters climb atop banquettes and belt out everything from classic standards to Broadway showstoppers to contemporary pop, with the kind of raw, trained talent that stops conversations mid-sentence. The Stardusters must audition for

their positions as if auditioning for a stage show itself. Once hired, they find themselves in a uniquely supportive environment: a place to hone their craft, try new material, build stamina, and be discovered. Ellen has spoken proudly about how many Stardusters have gone on to major careers in Broadway musicals and touring companies, both domestically and internationally. One particularly celebrated alumna, Marla Mindelle, went on to land the lead role in *Titanique*, the hit Grammy-nominated musical. Ellen honored the achievement by naming a banana float on the menu after Marla!

The diner itself is a feast of nostalgia. Its walls are lined with memorabilia from the 1950s, and a special gallery pays tribute to

the Miss Subways honorees a nod to Ellen’s own history and a celebration of an era when the subway system felt like a stage.

NAVIGATING LOSS

Ellen’s path has not been without hardship. The 2010 death of her husband Irving, her partner in life and business, was a profound loss. His absence reshaped her world personally and professionally.

Then came COVID-19. The pandemic posed an existential threat to a restaurant whose entire identity is built around strangers singing near each other. *Ellen’s Stardust Diner* closed for a year and a half, hemorrhaging revenue and leaving its staff singers, kitchen workers, managers in limbo. There were moments, Ellen admitted, when



she genuinely didn’t know if the diner would ever reopen. “We took a chance,” she said, “invested in unexpected repairs, and reopened to the public in November 2021.”

The gamble paid off. The Stardusters returned many of them specifically because the diner offers something no other venue quite replicates and the lines came back with them. Ellen even updated the menu in the aftermath, adding healthier options like quinoa bowls, though burgers and beer remain the crowd’s perennial favorites. The egg cream, a classic New York staple that should have been on the menu years earlier, finally made its debut as well.

STILL STAYS ACTIVE

At 85 years old, Ellen Hart is not interested in slowing down. She shows up to the diner several times a week, attends Friday planning meetings to brainstorm ideas with her team, and occasionally to the delight of everyone grabs a microphone

herself and performs. She works with a singing coach twice a month, keeps up a rigorous fitness routine centered on balance and posture, and takes style seriously enough that a trip to Nordstrom is reportedly part of her wellness regimen.

Her philosophy on aging is characteristically direct: “Keep moving. Stay interested. It’s never too late to pursue a new passion.” She credits staying involved in the business with keeping her sharp and engaged. As for retirement? “I don’t think so,” she said. “I’m having too much fun.”

Her role model is cabaret legend Marilyn Maye, who was still performing at 96. It’s the kind of aspiration that makes perfect sense for a woman who has spent her entire life in performance.

A NEW YORK ORIGINAL

In a city that chews through restaurants at a staggering rate, *Ellen’s Stardust*

Diner has not merely survived it has thrived, deepened, and become genuinely irreplaceable. It is a place that honors New York’s theatrical soul while feeding it burgers and milkshakes. It is a talent incubator dressed up as a diner, a love letter to the 1950s run by a woman who was literally on the walls of the subway in 1959.

Ellen Hart built all of this not through luck, but through an uncanny ability to understand what people want: warmth, spectacle, good food, and the electric sense that something real is happening right in front of them. On any given evening as a Starduster climbs onto a banquette and the room falls into an astonished hush, you can feel exactly what Ellen Hart has always believed: that New York, at its best, is still a stage and everyone in it deserves a seat in the front row.

Photos courtesy of Ellen’s Stardust Diner



ELLEN HART: IN HER OWN WORDS

What was the moment you realized that channeling your acting/singing passion into the restaurant business was the right path?

When we opened the diner, I realized my passion for singing and the restaurant industry could be combined. Why not sing at the Diner and hire singing waiters to combine show business and hospitality? Here we are almost 40 years later.

Ellen's Café became famous for its political regulars and even "instant marriage receptions." What do you think made that downtown spot such a magnet for New York City?

Back in the day at Ellen's Café, our baked goods were famous and we baked everything on-site. We were also located right across City Hall, so elected officials, Mayors and Governors would stop by. The neighborhood was very industrial back in the 80's. We also created a lot of fun events at the Café, and I gained publicity as a young entrepreneur who sang occasionally. I even ended up being asked to sing the National Anthem at the local fire house and at several New York Knicks and New York Rangers games over the years. I also came into the Café every day – greeting our guests, seating them, and welcoming everyone. And became a part of the community.

After returning home from Southern California, you had the idea of a retro-themed diner. What specifically did you see that made you think, New York needs this?

The concept was so popular in California, and I thought New York City would welcome the idea. We were one of the first retro-themed diners in NYC.

The singing waitstaff concept — the Stardusters — seems so obvious in hindsight, but it must have felt like a risk at the time. What made you confident it would work?

It was a gamble at first. The diner was working, so if the concept failed, we could go on without singing at diner, but I wanted to add to the experience. We wanted to combine great food and entertainment at a reasonable price.

Many Stardusters have gone on to major Broadway careers. How does it feel to know that the diner has served as a genuine launchpad for so many performers?

It feels incredibly positive for up-and-coming young talent to test out their craft and fine-tune their artistry while at the diner and is especially rewarding when they go on to huge shows. Marla Mindelle, for example, is the co-creator of the hit Broadway show *Titanique*; she was at the diner singing and serving just a few years ago. It's incredible.

At 85, you're still collaborating with a vocal coach, and occasionally grabbing the microphone yourself. What does being active in business give you that retirement simply couldn't?

I love singing and am still perfecting my style. It's ever evolving. And being involved in the Diner today is something I enjoy. It keeps me alert, busy and young!

You've watched New York City go through extraordinary transformations over six-plus decades. What do you think the city — and Times Square in particular — still gets right, and what do you worry about its losing?

Yes, there has been so much change. While I'm partial to the architectural style of the 1940's and 50's and commercial buildings today are replaced with all glass today, there really is no place like New York. From Broadway in Times Square to world-class museums and free concerts in the park, there is no place like home. New York City is always evolving. That's what makes the city so exciting.

Info: ellensstardustdiner.com/

