

"Decorations," "kindling," "buffers"—club insiders have a variety of terms for the pretty girls who attract wealthy customers.



In the Club

At New York City's hottest nightspot, the party is fueled by decorative young women with bodies made for sin. To join in, you'll need the right hair, makeup, clothes—and a perfectly blasé attitude. **By Danielle Pergament**

It's close to midnight, and West 17th Street is still slick from rain. A group of women make their way down the sidewalk, giggling that nervous giggle of insecurity mixed with anticipation. In skinny, ripped jeans, skyscraping heels, and smudgy, smoky eye makeup, each clutching an iPhone, they walk close, huddling together for warmth and confidence. A few of them pull their hair in front of their shoulders. No, they push it so it falls down their backs. No, no, definitely in front of their shoulders. They're young and beautiful, and it's going

to be a good night—they're feeling it. Suddenly, one in the group stumbles. The five-inch heel of her Christian Louboutin platform stiletto catches on a divot in the sidewalk. Bam! She goes down. Her friends rush to her side, as giddiness turns to panic. She stands up, wobbly, wiping the dirt off her knees. "Fuck!" A look of terror flashes across her face. "Did the doorman see me?! Do you think he saw?! He's never going to let me in! Fuck, fuck, fuck! Fuck these shoes!"

These aren't just regular \$800 shoes being cursed at. These \$800 shoes are meant for a single purpose. They're

not for impressing a date. They're not going to be photographed by the paparazzi, and they're not going to march down a runway. Tonight these shoes have one and only one mission: Get their owner past the velvet rope at 1 Oak.

1 Oak is what you (if you worked in that world) would call an image club. It's small by nightclub standards—it only holds 350 people—but on any given night between 11 P.M. and 4 A.M., its population includes the most beautiful, most styled-yet-disaffected-looking young women that New York City has to offer. It's not a private club, and despite a sign at the entrance, it's not closed for a private event. At 1 Oak, membership comes in the form of an incredibly short dress and high heels, lots of eye shadow, and hair—blonde, brunette, straight, wavy, whatever—that is long and very much on display.

Whether you love it, hate it, dismiss it, or aspire to it, this is the finely honed look of 1 Oak. What many consider the apex of New York City nightlife, 1 Oak stands for "one of a kind," a bit of a misnomer considering there is an outpost in Las Vegas, another coming in Mexico City, and a fourth in the works "somewhere on the West Coast," says Scott Sartiano, one of the owners. "1 Oak wouldn't work in every city. We have to really consider the place and make sure it's the right fit." And what it is—at this moment, in this city—is just that. On any night but Monday, hundreds of young women will spend hours styling their hair, trying on clothes, doing, undoing, and redoing their makeup with one goal: trying to look like they didn't try at all. Just as hundreds did last night. And just as hundreds will do tomorrow night. Remember the popular kids' table in the high-school cafeteria? Well, those kids graduated. And now they run a nightclub.

In their Rachel Roy cocktail dresses, waitresses like Leila and Casey are the Platonic ideal of 1 Oak.



"You really have to play up your makeup in this light," according to one clubgoer.

1 Oak is what you (if you worked in that world) would call an image club.



Like many nightclubs, 1 Oak is virtually anonymous from the street. The message is: If you have to ask where it is, you probably shouldn't be there. The entrance is a windowless wooden—one would presume oak-slatted storefront with no identifying marks except for a small, discreet crest affixed to the front door. Around 11 P.M. every night, the red carpet is unfurled, the barricades are hitched together, and the velvet rope is set up to stand in silent judgment. Voilà: the box.

Inside the box are a handful of huge and intimidating men wearing black coats and earpieces. Outside the box, throngs of lithe bodies—texting, pretending to text, trying to make eye contact with someone on the inside—wait in line, all while desperately trying to look like they don't care. Think of the box as the threshold to acceptance. Stand outside it, and you have no recourse but to wait—a few seconds or a few hours—because you're not getting into the box until you're invited. At that point, you glide on in, looking as haughty as you want. The popular kids just invited you for lunch.

The man who wields the power at 1 Oak is the doorman, Eddie Bilowich. Bilowich is exactly who you'd want standing at your front door if you happened to be a nightclub owner. Strikingly handsome with a scruffy beard that telegraphs just the right amount of cool, Bilowich looks as if he could be called on to help Claire Danes prevent a terrorist attack at any minute.

(Just a brief word about double standards: While women vie for the doorman's approval, for the men, the criteria may be even stricter. Be rich but not flashy, confident but not arrogant, polite but not dorky. The odds are stacked against you, anatomically speaking, so you're going to have to work harder. A dress shirt and coat if you're a commoner, a T-shirt and hoodie if you have your own record label. And please, no novelty cuff links.)

Using the same imperceptible head movement that mob bosses do in the movies, Bilowich controls the box. Quarter-inch nod, and someone's night just got made. Quarter-inch shake, some sad soul is denied. Then there's the signal to clear the line, the moment of utter defeat when everyone is dismissed. No chance of getting in tonight, folks. Go home. Rethink that leopard print.

"It's like casting a party every night," says Bilowich, 36, himself a former model. "Who do we want to have at the party? Of course, I look for women who are put together and stylish, but this is New York, so most of the women who come here already look the part. You want fun, cool people at your party. Are you smiling and friendly? Or are you giving me attitude?" Co-owner Sartiano agrees: "It's not about height or hair color. We want a crowd that looks like it could be in a fashion magazine about cool people in New York."

There might not be a uniform—except that there most certainly is.

Sometime after 2 A.M., the dance floor begins to fill up.



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On the night of the fateful stumble, there are no fewer than five women in line wearing the exact same \$800 patent-leather Christian Louboutin platform stilettos and either skinny jeans that are torn just enough to pass for sexy or skirts so tight and so short as to make you hope you never have a daughter. "1 Oak is definitely a legs club, not a boobs club," says Sam, an attractive 30-year-old pastry chef who goes to 1 Oak on special occasions. "Too much cleavage wouldn't work." But even if you are an Elite model and you nail the look, there's still no guarantee. "You have to make the pretty girls sweat a little—keep them waiting a few minutes. You don't want it to be too easy—and of course, it's good for business when you see beautiful women lined up outside," according to one club employee who asked not to be identified. "And you have to be able to walk in your heels."

Luckily for our protagonists, no one saw the fall. They make their

way to the box—nod, nod, nod, nod—and they're in. Careful not to make eye contact, they teeter gingerly onto the red carpet. Mission accomplished. In one instant, they're affirmed: They're beautiful and sexy and chosen. They walk up to the entrance, the bouncer pulls open the heavy wooden door—*whoosh*—and this is it: their runway moment. With the crowd watching, wondering what currency of importance they bear, the women walk into the blackness. Right this way, ladies.

Once you make it inside, your senses will be altered. At the end of an almost pitch-black hallway, another door will be opened for you. First, your ears will adjust to an almost but not quite uncomfortable level of Alicia Keys singing "Empire State of Mind" (or Foster the People singing "Pumped Up Kicks," or 50 Cent singing "If I Can't"). Next, your vision will recalibrate to moody Edison lightbulbs, one click brighter than

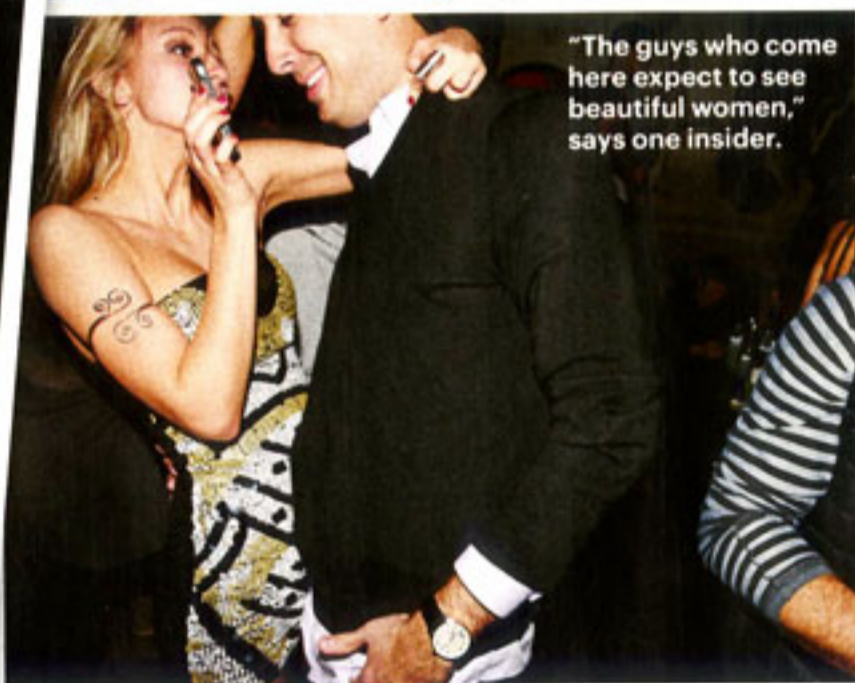
candlelight. It's strategically set to be dim enough that everyone has perfect, glowing skin, but bright enough that the high-heeleders can navigate the room without tripping. ("You really have to play up your makeup in this light," says Sam, the pastry chef. "Otherwise, it's a total waste—you won't see it. You need to bring out the drama.") The black lacquered bar, the black-and-white patterned floor, the oak-paneled ceiling, and the wall layered with wooden letters, packed so tightly and deliberately that it looks like an art installation: Every inch of the place is as styled as the crowd. You will almost inevitably adopt a slow, provocative, slinky walk. The hours you spent styling your hair, smudging your eye makeup, trying on dress after dress—it was all worth it. You made it to Oz, and the world goes from black-and-white to Technicolor. The hard part is over. It's 1:15 A.M. Let the party begin.



Skyscraping heels are de rigueur—and you'd better know how to walk in them.



Getting a seat in a booth means you're connected, famous, or very, very pretty.



"The guys who come here expect to see beautiful women," says one insider.

"It's like casting a party every night," says the doorman.

Chances are you're going to the bar. Not that you'll sit down—there are no chairs. You'll order some kind of mixed vodka drink and pretend to listen to your friends, while nonchalantly trying to get the attention of—or better yet, an invitation from—a hip-hop star in the unofficial VIP section. Just to be clear: You're pretty low on the food chain. "Decorations," "kindling," "buffers"—these are club terms for the pretty girls who make the rich table clients feel as if they're not alone, like some losers in the club. And most likely, this is the extent of your night: standing at the bar, drinking Grey Goose and soda, swinging your hips so it's not exactly clear if you're dancing or just restless. "I love that there's nowhere to sit! You basically *have* to dance!" says one of the women.

"When we opened, clubs in New York were only doing bottle service," says Richie Akiva, one of the owners. "They would let anyone in who was willing to buy a bottle. We wanted 1 Oak to be what New York used to be—make it about music and fun. We've done more bottle service over the years, but 1 Oak is still not the place you can buy your way into."

But all the beautiful people don't just happen by, and this is where promoters come in. According to the people who run nightclubs, promoters are a necessary evil. They are usually men, and it is their sole job to bring people to the club (1 Oak is hardly alone—virtually every nightclub in the world relies on promoters). They're paid for the women they bring in, and rates may vary, depending on the woman and the club. "The girls I bring to 1 Oak have to be tall and skinny," said one

groggy promoter, slightly irritated at being woken up by a reporter at 1 P.M. "In a place like Miami, the girls can be short, but they have to be cute. And in Vegas, they're just looking for women with large breasts. But 1 Oak is very strict at the door—they have a specific look."

Not to be a downer here, but does anyone feel even a twinge of conscience about judging women, period, not to mention judging them so ruthlessly? "Of course not," says the same club insider. "It's why people come here. The guys who come here expect to see beautiful women." If this scene sounds like one confiscated passport shy of a *Law & Order* episode, consider this critical point: The women really *want* to be here. And more than that, most of them are doing the same objectifying. "I totally check out

the women," one woman told me. "I check them out more than the men because the girls are so put together."

If you're more than a pretty face—if you're part of an entourage, if you're a regular, or if you're friends with an owner—you're going to a table for which you (or someone in your party) will pay anywhere from \$1,500 to \$10,000. The price can depend on the night and the table. If you're facing the door, you're probably good-looking, because the host wants attractive people to be instantly visible. If you're near the DJ, you're a valued, money-generating client. And if you are anywhere in close proximity to Jay-Z, Busta Rhymes, Lindsay Lohan, or Tyson Beckford, you are very, very special.

If you're any of the above, you will slide across the leather banquette. This is when you meet one of a half dozen or so tall, thin women dressed in a skintight, black, off-the-shoulder Rachel Roy cocktail dress and tall black boots. She is your waitress. And like all the other waitresses at 1 Oak, she is gorgeous. Gorgeous in the way that she looks like she should be dating George Clooney. "SoulCycle four times a week," confirms Casey Cohen, a 28-year-old waitress who has worked at the club since it opened. Cohen is from Long Island, she has a master's degree in art education from New York University, and for the past six years, around 10 P.M., she pulls on her black, over-the-knee Charles David boots and shows up for work. She has long blonde hair, deep-set eyes, and a figure that looks, well, like she goes to SoulCycle four times a week. If you were a hedge-fund manager who just sat down in your corner booth at 1 Oak, the arrival of



In miniskirts or skintight jeans, legs are very much on display at 1 Oak.

Casey Cohen at your table would make you very, very happy.

The waitresses are the Platonic ideal of 1 Oak. They have the look that women who come here are striving for, consciously or not. The long, shiny hair, toned bodies, short dresses, thigh-high boots, and sexy, smudgy makeup—and the apathy. Leila Tonuzi, a waitress with long, flowing, shampoo-ad brown hair, exotic eyes, and bronze skin, has it nailed. When she brings out the sparklers—because yes, for the right \$1,000 bottle of champagne, you get sparklers—she walks through the crowd as disinterested as a model on a runway.

It's 3 A.M., and in the past 15 minutes, 200 people have entered the club. Really, 200 people. It's like three buses full of cool, well-styled New Yorkers just pulled up outside. (This is also unique to 1 Oak and happened like clockwork every night I was there: For reasons no one can quite explain, 1 Oak doesn't get crowded until very, very late.) The restless bar-side hip swing has turned into full-on dancing, and the women all strike the same pose:

arms above their heads, wrists intertwined, undulating like upright snakes. "It makes you look skinnier!" one of them shouts over Rihanna's "We Found Love." This is the magic hour. You just did a shot of Patron with Leonardo DiCaprio. Someone else puts his hand on your lower back. The intimate touch just means "I can put my hand on your back a beat too long because we're both part of the club now." (It's also one of the reasons you can't wear Spanx here—that, and you shouldn't need Spanx if you're at 1 Oak in the first place.) It's all part of the DNA of 1 Oak.

Nightclubs have always reflected who we are and how we define beauty,

youth, and cool in a certain place at a certain time: the hedonism of Studio 54 in the 1970s, the conspicuous consumption of Palladium in the 1980s. At any given moment, the trendiest nightclub tells us who we aspire to be and how we aspire to look. The women who line 1 Oak every night—just like the women before them, who crowded into Tunnel or Limelight or Bungalow 8—reflect a fantasy life we all pretend to live.

Eventually, however, every dream has to end. By 4:30 A.M., the music slows. The Edison bulbs are turned up from 10 watts to maybe 30. And a hundred die-hard revelers—their ears ringing, their hair sweaty—make their way out of the same dark hallway that welcomed them hours earlier. They're back on the sidewalk. The velvet rope is gone, and a string of town cars idle down the block. The party is over, and the young, beautiful people are going home. Each time, it's a little dispiriting—the end of a party so thoughtfully cast, so purposefully arranged. They'll go home, sleep off the booze and adrenaline. And when they're ready for more, 1 Oak will be waiting. ♦