



Philadelphia

Behind This Wall Is the Most Exclusive Club in Center City. (Don't Forget Your Tankini.)

HOW THE LOMBARD SWIM CLUB BECAME THE LOMBARD SWIM CLUB

by **MICHAEL CALLAHAN**
photography by **CHRISTOPHER LEAMAN**

“Just act like you belong and we’ll be fine.”



ED RENDELL SWIMS HERE Views of the pool on a sleepy summer afternoon

I’m trying to remember the last time I did something like this. I think it was 1982, when my friend Bing (yes, Bing) and I were 19 and nonchalantly sauntered up to the bouncer of some dive bar in Cherry Hill and somehow convinced him we were 21, subsequently sailing through the door into a den of smoke and thumping music. It’s been a long time since I’ve tried to crash a party.

I’m with a friend of a friend of a friend—we’ll call this person Jimmy, though for reasons that will become clear momentarily, Jimmy isn’t said person’s real name—and on this particularly steamy summer night, we’re walking into the entrance of the Lombard Swim Club, an imposing fortress of water, liquor and secrecy located between 20th and 21st streets, not far from Rittenhouse Square. If you’ve strolled this block of Lombard, you probably never even noticed the club was here. Which is precisely the point.

There are difficult “gets” to pull off in Philly: sideline passes to an Eagles game at the Linc. An unreserved table at Vetri on

a Saturday night. A parking space on the City Hall apron. But those are easy pickings compared to procuring a membership at the Lombard Swim Club.

Its wait list is currently eight years long and counting. That’s right. *Eight years*. To go *swimming*. Want to know who’s a member? It would be easier to find out what really happened in Benghazi. Just getting inside the Lombard Swim Club is an exercise akin to getting inside the Kremlin. And I *was* inside the Kremlin. *During the Cold War*.

And so here I am, trying to unearth what all of the fuss is about.

To do so, I’ve enlisted one very nervous member who has threatened me with various forms of bodily harm if anything goes wrong. “I’ve worked too hard,” Jimmy tells me. Enough said. I understand.

We amble up to the front desk, where we’re greeted by a skinny, bearded 20-something in arty glasses who looks like one of those guys who are always on laptops at La Colombe. Jimmy shows a green ID card,

and Arty Glasses types his info into a computer as I stand around and try not to fidget. My palms sweat. Jimmy and I have mapped our entire strategy, a meticulously planned-out caper fit for Mr. Phelps’s self-destructing tape recorder on *Mission: Impossible*: I’m a friend visiting from New York (we picked a place where I have actually lived so I can answer questions if anyone asks), and I work in branding (close enough to publishing).

I idly remark on the paint color, some odd Caribbean-esque pastel. Jimmy and I make inane chitchat, as if we come here all the time. Members can bring guests (though there are limits to how many times a given guest can visit), but a fog of paranoia nonetheless wafts around the front desk. The club has been tipped off that my magazine is pursuing a story about it, and publicity is never on the guest list at Lombard. Everyone has been put on high alert to identify any suspicious interlopers.

I expect armed guards to swarm us at any moment.

After some perfunctory mouse-clicking, Arty Glasses flickers his impassive eyes up from his computer screen and looks at me. “I’m sorry,” he reports in a bored monotone, “but I’m not going to be able to let you in.”

The Lombard Swim Club wasn’t always the Lombard Swim Club. Designed by famed architect Tim Vreeland, the son of legendary fashion editor Diana Vreeland, it was built for \$350,000 in 1961, the heyday of the American swimming-pool craze, which itself was an outgrowth of the explosion of the suburbs. At the time, Lombard Street wasn’t yet Lombard Street but was something more akin to East Kensington today. Perhaps because of this, the spot’s owners christened it the Rittenhouse Swim Club, hoping to shift some Square glamour a few blocks west. Its president was Nathaniel Lieb, an entrepreneur best known for being a patent holder on the dental water drill.

The new club had an Olympic-sized pool, a cozy restaurant and a boozy singles scene—many women were known to bathe topless—and it didn’t take long for it to become a hub. It also didn’t take long for things to go downhill. By the late ’70s, RSC was in disrepair; the staff “was very unhappy and disorganized, and carrying on unprofessionally,” says Eli Pritzker. “Things just weren’t going the way they should.”

Pritzker, at that time the co-owner of a Center City electric supply company,

became the de facto spokesman for a cabal of unhappy members who wanted to buy the club from Lieb & Co. Over lunch at Victor Café in 1979, Pritzker presented the idea to Lieb, after which there was a raucous meeting at the Greenfield School at which the membership basically forced the owners’ hands. The club was sold to a group of members, then promptly reorganized, repainted and restored in a sort of urban barn-raising. (Actually, it was more like a Pottery Barn-raising.) Most importantly, it was renamed. The Lombard Swim Club would be classy, clean and family-friendly. “The club was the ultimate,” says Pritzker, now 88, whose daughter, Nina, currently sits on the Lombard board. “We had speakers. We had classic movies. We had people at the top of their professions giving lectures. The children had activities that were good for their development, that elevated them—they weren’t watching television.”

As more and more people sought to join and fewer and fewer left, the club slowly morphed from quaint community pool into the secretive, almost mythic Xanadu it is today. The Society Hill Swim Club was swankier, boasting a famed half-indoor, half-outdoor L-shaped pool, but its transition to a Philadelphia Sports Club in the late ’90s only intensified Lombard’s growing mystique. Now, basically anyone with a PSC membership can lounge with the swells. And where’s the exclusiveness in that?

The only other competition Lombard has faced came in 2011, when developer Bart Blatstein joined forces with PR titan Nicole Cashman to open the Arrow Swim Club across from the Piazza in NoLibs. At \$1,000 for a seasonal membership, the place was supposed to attract the Philly equivalent of the Kardashians. It closed after only one season. It now has new owners who’ve rechristened it the North

CONTINUED ON PAGE 213

“I’m not going to lie; I cried when I got in,” admits a Lombard member. “I got the call and basically fell to my knees in joy.”

TIPS. TRENDS. TREATMENTS.

BEAUTY BUZZ



Photo by Elizabeth Kross Photography

BLUE A HAIR STUDIO

From the moment you walk in the door, you will feel an all-out commitment to creativity and comfort. BLue is an intimate blend of live jazz martini lounge, retro coffee house, and local hang out. BLue features leading-edge hair design, styling, makeup, skin care, massage therapy, and a complete line of hair products.

2550 Huntingdon Pike, Huntingdon Valley, PA
215.947.2963 | bluehairstudio.com



Contact
Becky Festa
215.979.6557 or
bfesta@phillymag.com

MISS THIS ISSUE?



SWARTHMORE HAIR STUDIO

Find your personalized hair color. Fade-resistant. Essentially damage free. Created with an environmental and social conscience you can feel good about. Book your appointment today.

4 Park Avenue, Swarthmore, PA
610-544-6620 | swarthmorehairstudio.com



ANDRÉ RICHARD SALON

André Richard Salon specializes in education, hair color, hair cuts and bridal events. 2 center city locations with 3 levels of stylists.

André Richard Salon | 1218 Locust St.
ARS Parlour | 204 South 12th St.
215.735.1590 | andrerichardsalon.com

Swim Club

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 85

Shore Beach Club, and a young and insanely buff crowd (it's a gay-boy fave) splashes around for considerably less.

As that wait list the length of two presidential administrations attests, membership in Lombard has taken on a kind of panache in a town that always seems starved for it, no matter how many restaurants Stephen Starr opens. Lombard's board and administration know this. There are tales of board members being harangued for "ins," and every year seems to bring new, stricter rules, often debated loudly at ad hoc board meetings at Pub & Kitchen. "We bitch a lot about the rules," says one 40-something mom, who, like every other member I talked to, insisted, first and foremost, that she not be identified *at all* for fear of having her membership revoked. (Three members I called hung up on me, each citing basically the same mantra: "I can't risk losing my membership if they find out I talked to you.") For those who have finally reached the holy grail—or at least a poolside cabana—getting kicked out of Lombard would be akin to Cersei's walk of shame in last season's finale of *Game of Thrones*. "There are a lot of rules. This year the new rule is you can't use an aerosol can for sunscreen. Can you believe it? So now I just spray my kid outside on the sidewalk and then we go in. You also used to be able to have cocktails poolside, with your feet in the water. Not now."

Oh, such problems. Perhaps this is to be expected in such a rarefied environment. Ed Rendell is a member, his hulking body bobbing in the pool like Buddha. So is Phillies pitcher Cliff Lee. Legend has it that the staffer who posted that on Facebook a few years back was quickly exposed and Cersei-ed out. (Legend further has it—somewhat unbelievably—that the ex-employee is now a member. As for Lee, he hasn't been seen at the pool for a while. But really, who can blame any Phillie for being in hiding these days?) But no one is coming to Lombard to stargaze. They're all coming to sunbathe, to socialize, to imbibe, and to have a place to dump their kids while they do the first three. And they're coming because so many other people aren't allowed to. Envy is Lombard's greatest social currency. Membership—which can set a family of four back \$3,800 for the season, plus another \$835 for the nanny—has become the summer equivalent of getting your kid into Penn Alexander. "I'm not going to lie; I cried when I got in," admits another Lombard mom with two small kids. "I got the

Swim Club

call and basically fell to my knees in joy.”

There are, shall we say, creative ways to get into Lombard, though no one is very forthcoming about what those are. (Mmm-hmm.) “I snuck in some other way” is all I get out of one divorcée who runs with the Center City power crowd and has been a poolside staple for years. When there’s room, board members can sponsor new members, allowing them to controversially leapfrog the wait list. “I know for a fact that some board members have been offered bribes—sometimes sizeable ones—to get someone in,” says a Rittenhouse socialite I know who let her membership lapse after her kids went away to college. “But the board is big and full of smart, assertive people who don’t need the money. I think it would be very tough to do that and not be found out.”

Indeed, the 15-member Lombard board, while not made up of the heavy hitters of the Center City power axis, includes four attorneys, a Penn professor, a Penn administrator, a doctor, two psychologists and a high-profile interior designer. And then there’s the club’s legendary (some would say infamous) general manager, Carol Kaplan, who runs the place like a chlorinated Valley Forge Military Academy. A middle-aged woman with short gray hair and John Lennon glasses, Kaplan is the board’s eyes and ears, and has both the imposing carriage and the faint air of malevolence of a 1930s Catholic-school nun. Members talk about her with a sense of awe, saying nothing goes on at the swim club that she doesn’t know about, approve, monitor or quash. It’s hard to tell where she begins and the club ends. Making her, quite literally, Carol Lombard.

For all of the bristling that may come from the heavy-handed management and the shroud of mystery that engulfs the club as a result, members know they’ve got a good thing going, which is why none of them want to mess it up. It’s like a great restaurant where you can’t nab a reservation; you desperately want to get a table, and once you do, you don’t want anyone else to.

“They’re trying to make it as great as possible,” says Eli Pritzker. “They don’t want to overcrowd it; they don’t want to ruin something that is precious to them.” He says that while Lombard’s rules, secrecy and wait list may seem oppressive, and even silly, they stem from a desire to maintain a jewel hidden in the middle of the city: “You don’t want to turn it into Coney Island.”

I’MIN. AT LAST.

Jimmy and I sit on two deep blue chaises on the upper deck of the Lombard Swim Club, overlooking the pool behind us and the bar in front of us. It’s a week after our initial attempt, but this time we’ve made it past the invisible velvet ropes.

I got dinged last week because of a guest-list snafu. So we’ve gone through the whole nerve-racking routine all over again, and now our reward has come: prime seating on the adults-only cocktail deck, where I’m drinking one of the tastiest margaritas I have ever sipped, made expertly by a bartender named François. Because of course the bartender here is named François.

But as I survey my surroundings, trying to drink in everything around me, my spirits deflate just a bit. Considering all the buildup and hype, I expected something fit for Cannes, and instead am sitting in what you’d get if Positano Coast mated with a YMCA. Chaises ring a cement deck strung with overhead white lights and packed with umbrellas and tiny acrylic tables with plastic chairs, the kind you get as part of a picnic set at Walmart for \$69.99. There are saggy-breasted shirtless men in Teva sandals eating bar food, sitting across from clench-jawed wives with tasteful gold hoop earrings and attitudes made sharper by their third vodka tonics. Some people read newspapers, while others are enjoying the warm night air and ’60s music. The Phillies are on the flat-screen near the bar. In a corner, Carol Lombard, wearing a loud aqua top and jeans, is reading out raffle-ticket numbers in a voice fit for NPR. There’s the occasional squeal as a random wife scurries over to claim her prize of a rain umbrella, as if she’s just been called down to Contestants’ Row on *The Price Is Right*.

This is it? *This* is the place everyone is fighting to get into?

“Well, well, what do you think?” Jimmy asks, sipping his vodka soda. With the entrance exam behind us, he’s turned from Jimmy to Jimmy Olsen.

I try, unsuccessfully, to mask my confusion. Somehow I’d conjured an image of Rouge, that venerable see-and-be-seen bistro on the Square, only with water. This is clearly not that. I arrived expecting a crowd fit for Lenny Kravitz and got one fit for Gladys Kravitz. “It’s not quite what I pictured” is all I manage.

“I know what you mean,” he says, slouching back into his chaise. “It’s usually a lot douchier than this by this time of night. I

don’t know, maybe everyone’s at the Shore.”

Daytime at Lombard isn’t nighttime at Lombard. Daytime boasts a healthy contingent of moms, a sea of Betty Drapers with shiny waxed limbs and big straw hats and oval sunglasses, lamenting the lack of good help and good schools as their little ones splash around and wolf down cheeseburgers. (Typical of a place like this, there are a fair amount of foodie kids: At one point, as I survey the giant blackboard menu by the kitchen, a 12-year-old girl in braces offers wanly, “You should really try the chicken parmesan. It’s as good as anything they serve at Little Nonna’s.”)

“I don’t think it’s super-snobby,” says one young mom who’s a regular on weekdays. “But maybe that’s because I live in the neighborhood, so I know some of these women. But I *will* say that it’s gotten skinnier and prettier. It’s not exactly intimidating, but it’s annoying. A lot of the moms are very good-looking. It’s a very bikini-wearing mom group.”

That may be. But tonight, it’s much more a Kohl’s-wearing group. As the evening goes on, I end up chatting with some members and land on some essential truths about the Swim Club Everyone Wants to Join. “It’s convenient, I can walk to it, it’s not overly expensive, the food is good, the crowd is friendly, and it beats battling traffic to the Shore,” one vet tells me. All of which is nice, I say, but it doesn’t explain the almost romantic yearning to get in. That’s when a comely 40-ish brunette with a name I don’t quite catch laughs. “Well, *of course* it’s nice to be in a place everyone else wishes they were,” she says, with just the faintest trace of a smirk on her lips. “Isn’t it?”

I’VE KNOWN ROB WASSERMAN, the owner of Rouge, for the better part of a decade, and there are two things I’ve always admired about him. First, there’s how he’s managed to maintain his Rittenhouse restaurant as a buzzy enclave of the overindulged, the oversexed and the overtanned of Philadelphia. Rouge is still a hive of salacious gossip 17 years after Wasserman’s father-in-law, Neil Stein, opened it. Whether you’re contemplating an affair, starting one or ending one, there’s still no better place to do it than Rouge. Second, Rob Wasserman is the only man in the city who can wear all black and not look utterly ridiculous.

We’re sitting at the bar inside the restaurant. I’ve come to Wasserman because of all the people I know in Philly, I figure he’s the

perfect one to demystify Lombard. Why do people clamor to get in? Try to schmooze board members? Wait eight years on a list? I posit that it’s the nuclear version of trying to get a window table at Rouge on a summer Saturday night. Why is that whole concept—I *got in and you didn’t*—so important to so many people in Philadelphia?

“I think a lot of it has to do with New York,” he says, sipping a cup of coffee. “I mean, Philly is not New York. You hear that all the time. And it’s not. In New York, there are tons of places where you can feel exclusive, feel important, feel like you’re in *the* place. But it’s not like that here. It’s smaller, more compact. And you don’t have the money here like you have in New York. So when things come up like the Lombard Swim Club, where it’s virtually impossible to get in—or at least to get in right away—it becomes a status competition. It divides people into groups. You’re a member or you’re not. There’s like this aura of mystery that goes into it. It feeds on itself.”

We try to identify the other status-feeders in Philly. Ownership of a house on Delancey Street. Membership in the Sporting Club at the Bellevue or the Union League, though those aren’t as hard to come by as perhaps they once were. A seat on the Barnes board. We settle on the term “psychic wealth,” which I dutifully scribble down in my notebook: when you feel you’re rich not because you actually are, but because your exterior trappings—the more exclusive the better—telegraph that you are.

My friend Tim Adams, the events manager of Pennsylvania 6, applied for Lombard membership last year. When I told him about the wait list, he seemed stunned at first, but then undaunted by the prospect of waiting until 2021. He’s just bought a place at 21st and South, and he’ll be there for a while, so he can bide his time. He told me about his memories of growing up at his swim club in the Northeast: the socials, the bingo games, the pool. He wants that again, only more fabulous. Much, much more fabulous. Lombard, he says, “is like the *Great Gatsby* of swim clubs.”

I wonder. I think back to something *Gatsby*’s author, F. Scott Fitzgerald, once wrote: “ ... [T]hough the Jazz Age continued, it became less and less an affair of youth. The sequel was like a children’s party taken over by the elders. ... ”

MAIL@PHILLYMAG.COM

Single and Searching? Successful, Selective, Simply too Busy?

Let us assist you in finding the meaningful relationship you seek.

We facilitate discreet introductions for highly accomplished, attractive, selective men and women seeking their ideal partner.

Let’s face it, meeting people is easy...it’s meeting the *right* person that is difficult. Together we can achieve the results that you are looking for!

All calls are confidential.

Premier Match
Upscale Matchmaking for Single Professionals

Philadelphia 215-752-2500 | www.premiermatch.com

Principal
Christie Nightingale



PET OF THE MONTH

ADOPT ME! I’M MACK! A gentle and loving 1-2 year old pit bull mix who was found as a stray. I’m waiting at PAWS for a home!

To adopt Mack, visit www.phillypaws.org/adopt call 215-298-9680 ext. 16, or email dogs@phillypaws.org.

DATING

WOMAN SEEKING MAN. Very pretty professional woman from wealthy Main Line family, seeking professional or business gentleman. 72+. *If interested, please call 215-545-0122*

CHILD CARE

ELIDA’S HOUSEHOLD PROFESSIONALS, INC
ALL CANDIDATES DRIVE AND HAVE CARS • FT/PT, LIVE IN, LIVE OUT • Leader Since 1992 • Top Quality • Staffing All Household Positions - Nannies, Baby Care, Housekeepers, Nurses Aides, Companions, Drivers, Estate Managers, Couples, etc. • In Person Interviews • Screenings: Identity Search, Criminal (PAR FBI), Drug (10 Panel), Driving Record • Placements Within 60 Mile Radius of Phila. • Professional, Confidential.

191 Presidential Blvd, Bala Cynwyd, PA.
610-668-1111 | www.ehphome.com

ENLIGHTENMENT

PSYCHIC READINGS BY MICHAEL LAFFERTY
Private/ personal, phone readings. CC accepted.
215-482-6517 | www.psychicread.com

ENTERTAINMENT

“PHILADELPHIA’S BEST KEPT SECRET”
Executive Choice is an elite referral agency serving the needs of professional gentlemen. We visit your hotel or residence in Center City/ Burbs, Jersey & Wilmington, DE. Noon-3am.



phillymag.com/gphilly

All real estate advertising contained in this magazine is subject to state and federal fair housing laws. The federal Fair Housing Act of 1968 makes it illegal to advertise any preference, limitation, or discrimination based on race, color, religion, sex, actual or perceived handicap, familial status, or national origin, or any intention to make any such preference, limitation, or discrimination. Pennsylvania law also forbids discrimination based on age; ancestry; or use of a guide or support animal by the blind, deaf, or physically handicapped or by the handler or trainer of a guide or support animal. New Jersey law also forbids discrimination based on marital status, affectional or sexual orientation, ancestry, or source of lawful income. *Philadelphia* magazine will not knowingly accept any real estate advertising that is in violation of the law. All dwellings advertised in this magazine are available on an equal opportunity basis. To complain of housing discrimination, call HUD at (800) 669-9777 or (215) 656-0500. The toll-free number for the hearing-impaired is (800) 927-9275. You may also call the Pennsylvania Human Relations Commission at (215) 560-2496, or (215) 560-3599 for the hearing-impaired; or the New Jersey Department of Law and Public Safety’s Division on Civil Rights at (609) 292-4605, or (609) 292-1785 for the hearing-impaired.