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Food & Lifestyle

Holbrook House restaurant bets on authenticity for high-stakes downtown investment



Image: Matthew Millman Photography

The immaculate bar centerpiece at the Holbrook House, a new restaurant opening Sept. 6 at 1 Sansome that aims to offer an elevated setting — as well as regular engagement from all kinds of Financial District commuters — anchoring the 42-story office tower owned by PGIM and managed by Barker Pacific Group.

MATTHEW MILLMAN PHOTOGRAPHY



By **Alex Barreira** – Staff Reporter, San Francisco Business Times
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Don't be fooled by the opulence, the Dom Perignon, the caviar, the instantly obvious appeal to the venture capital firm tenants on the floors above, and expectations of how packed it will be when the J.P. Morgan Healthcare conference comes to town in January.

Phil Spiegel says his restaurant, Holbrook House, opening next week at the One Sansome Conservatory, isn't just another host spot for a high-powered business lunch (which the neighborhood already has plenty of). It's a place with finesse, for sure, but more importantly, he said, he's hoping it will add a little something that San Francisco's downtown lacks a little bit compared with Las Vegas or Nashville or San Diego: fun.

“People downtown work in suits and work in hoodies,” Spiegel said over a seemingly endless sampling of a day’s worth of courses and dessert, which nevertheless lived up to the menu’s guiding principle, ‘craveability.’ “Let’s be authentic.”

Whether the big bet will pay off for Spiegel and his landlord, Barker Pacific Group may come down less to the people eyeing the top-shelf \$25 martinis than those intrigued by the \$8 Modelo – 24 oz., served in a can plunged into a bucket of crushed ice and rolled up table side in a cart – and the office workers of all stripes willing to incorporate the grab-and-go kiosk, the regular breakfast, lunch or after-work drink here into their routines.

Modelo is on the menu in part due to a superstition-turned-tradition on Spiegel’s softball team, but it’s also the sort of nod and wink that Holbrook House hopes to embody: Catering to a range of tastes, aiming for high standards of service without taking itself too seriously. Hoodies are just fine here.

Hours will be Monday through Friday from 8:00 a.m. to midnight (coffee starts at 7:30 a.m. and cocktail service runs 8:00 p.m. to midnight). The restaurant seats 60 indoors, 24 at the bar and 40 at the semi-outdoor patio tables in the open-air atrium.

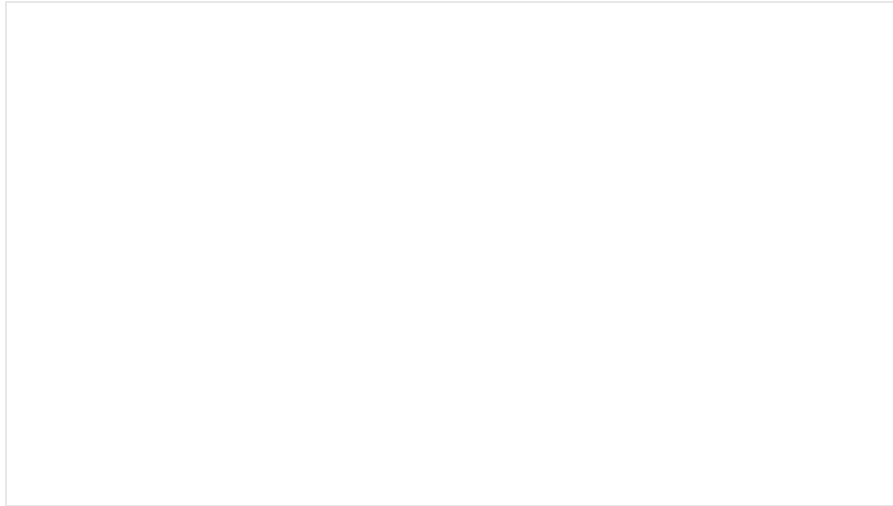
These days Holbrook House (kind of like downtown San Francisco, in general) can’t afford to put on exclusive airs. It will need to be accessible and drive daily volume to remain a success beyond the first few years of runway from its generous, percentage-weighted rent agreement with building manager Barker Pacific Group.

Spiegel, via his hospitality management firm Please FiDi and its veteran operations crew, wants to position the restaurant as a special draw for future office tenants to schmooze with clients while also part of a “hospitality concierge” program – also involving service from nearby restaurants – for tenants’ use across their offices and the conference rooms, private dining areas, tenant lounges and The Conservatory itself.

That amenity’s special smartphone app for tenants is nearly finished and the goal is to roll out the service likely sometime in October.

Spiegel also mentioned the building’s owner, PGIM, and the involvement of Newmark – which manages many buildings – as both a building tenant and the leasing agent looking to solve the building’s current occupancy of roughly 68%.

“I’m trying to sell food and beverage and hospitality that’s worthy of being in San Francisco, and the real estate people are trying to get people to lease space and get back in the office,” he explained. “So the marriage of the two at this moment seems very logical.”

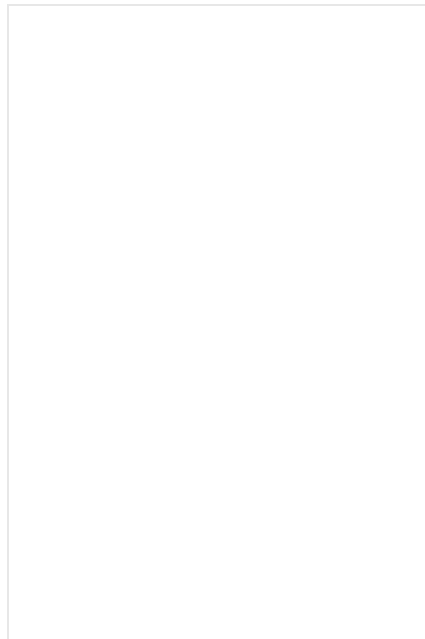


A pairing you won't find often elsewhere: caviar and duck-fat hashbrowns along with quail eggs and a 24-oz. Modelo in a can. It's not necessarily recommended, but certainly possible at the Holbrook House in One Sansome, which looks to offer a little something for everyone in the Financial District.

ALEX BARREIRA

There's a lot riding on the success of this hospitality venue, as the visual centerpiece of a roughly \$25 million upgrade for the 42-story building. Also as the first big splash for Spiegel since leaving behind his role as Clint Reilly's hospitality operations czar at the Julia Morgan Ballroom, Merchants Exchange Club and Credo Restaurant – bringing capital raised from friends, hard-won lessons in leadership, and some of his most trusted lieutenants, such as Vicki Tom (Director of Operations) and Lillian Phan (Director of Events and Partnerships).

The restaurant is sold out for its opening day on Wednesday, Sept. 6, but reservations are open (and Spiegel hinted, coyly, at surprises in store) for the rest of the debut week.



Jeff Schlarb, interior designer of the Holbrook House restaurant (left), poses with proprietor Phil Spiegel (right) in the completed restaurant, opening Sept. 6 to the public at 1 Sansome.

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Holbrook House's Chef Holly Stevens leads the kitchen and elevated American menu. She hails originally from San Francisco and the California Culinary Academy and has had a hand in the kitchens at Bar Agricole and Delfina; Michelin-starred spots Aziza and the Michael Mina restaurant group; along with Trou Normand. More than you'd expect – from the (English muffin-style) buns of the half-pork, half-beef burger to the ice cream in the dessert sundae – is made in house and for what it's worth passed my test for quality.

The nearly 16,000-square-foot atrium adjoining the restaurant can accommodate up to 2,000 guests and is slated to host live music and special events on select days but for the most part will be open to the public. The venue, along with the ultra-flexible space arrangements of the North Lobby – capable of a 356 guest reception, or 160-seated dining, or a handful of private meeting rooms – are fully booked out for the first day of Dreamforce on Sept. 12.

The restaurant is the first commercial hospitality project from designer Jeff Schlarb, known for his master interior home arrangements for the Bay Area's mega-rich, and there's plenty of details to admire in the mix of retro and modern sensibilities.

Overall, my impression of the restaurant's service and concept is that it's not so much like the Sho Club in Salesforce Park – another splashy downtown investment, surrounded by public land, with a creative (if curious) concept in NFT-based membership – where **exclusivity is kind of the point**.

Spiegel likened the vibe at Holbrook House before to a "private club without the membership fee." To this end I'll say there are some easter eggs woven into the service that will reward the careful eye and the return customer.