

Lady Gaga at  
Annabel's in  
2011

# Join the club

For over 50 years, Annabel's has been a glamorous hideaway of the great and the good. Now, with an exciting move underway, the club is opening its doors to a new vanguard

By Emma J Page



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**I**t's unassuming from the outside. Just a discreet striped canopy on a townhouse on the edge of Berkeley Square marks the entrance to the ultra-exclusive, members-only nightclub Annabel's.

This dimly lit, louche Berkeley Square basement has played host to many an intriguing encounter, legendary party and intimate dinner; a heady collision of old guard and new. This is a place where Frank Sinatra unwound after-hours, where Ray Charles played informal sets and John Wayne and Jack Nicholson propped up the bar. Over the years, the club has garnered a reputation for being a keeper of secrets, and a sense of off-duty intimacy remains integral to its allure.

Mark Birley opened Annabel's in 1963, when a friend, casino owner John Aspinall, wanted somewhere to unwind in the small hours. The idea of a members-only nightclub was novel. Named for Birley's then-wife Annabel – who went on to marry the late financier Sir James Goldsmith – the hangout was old-school yet boho; quintessentially British with a sprinkling of exoticism. 'Everything came together in a rather magical way,' recalled Anna Wintour, then

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two decades away from helming *Vogue*. 'The Sixties was an extraordinary time to be alive in London. And at the centre was Annabel's, standing for the old world but also representing the new.'

The club's country-house-style interiors – largely the brainchild of designer Nina Campbell – offered a decadent glamour not seen in the capital since before the Second World War.

'People had thought there would never be anything nice again,' observed legendary interior designer Nicky Haslam. 'No luxury, no building wonderful rooms. And it was a time when designers and photographers were becoming very fashionable.'

In this heady new era, the establishment rubbed shoulders with creatives – although George Harrison and Beatles manager Brian Epstein were denied entry in 1966 when the former refused to wear a tie.

In the early days, the club was populated largely by Birley's friends and connections. Five hundred founding members paid an annual membership of five guineas. Today, the surviving 78 pay the same rate – the equivalent of £5.25 a year. It's an enviable fee for a club preparing to reincarnate as a dawn-to-dusk, fully fledged private members' club, catering to an eclectic mix of established faces and young talent.



**1963**

Mark Birley opens Annabel's – named after his then wife – in the basement of the Clermont Club. He tells founding members it will be 'international in character and more of a club in the true sense than any other'.

**1970**

Ella Fitzgerald and Ray Charles perform.

**1973**

On its tenth anniversary, the club has a waiting list approaching 2000.

**1986**

Diana, the Princess of Wales, and Sarah Ferguson slip into the club disguised as policewomen.

**2003**

The Queen pays her only recorded visit to a nightclub, ordering a gin Martini with no lemon.

**2007**

Birley sells the club to Richard Caring.

**2012**

Longtime member Bryan Ferry launches his album *The Jazz Age* at the club.

**2017**

Annabel's relocates to a Palladian townhouse two doors away at number 46.

Under the watchful eye of Richard Caring, who bought the venue in 2007 from Birley, the original has been transplanted to a Grade-I-listed Palladian townhouse at 46 Berkeley Square, just two doors away. Over four floors, the new site offers restaurants, bars, private dining rooms, a cigar salon, a workspace and a garden restaurant with an impressive retractable glass roof. Interior designer Martin Brudnizki – lauded for his combination of classic and contemporary – has ensured that the grandeur associated with the original remains. A cantilevered stone staircase, elaborate plaster ceilings and majestic rococo fireplaces form the bones of his design, while an iconic Buddha has been reinstated in the building's basement, where a new nightclub will be recreated.

'We've been very conscious of retaining the spirit of the original while creating something fresh and engaging,' Brudnizki explains. 'Nina Campbell's interiors were vibrant, bold and beautifully layered, and I hope we have mirrored this enthusiasm with our design.'

Annabel's embraces the laid-back glamour with which it will be forever associated, but the focus is also on the newest, brightest talent that the city – and world at large – has to offer. A cultural committee including photographer Mario Testino, style commentator Derek Blasberg, make-up artist Charlotte Tilbury and art consultant Hikari

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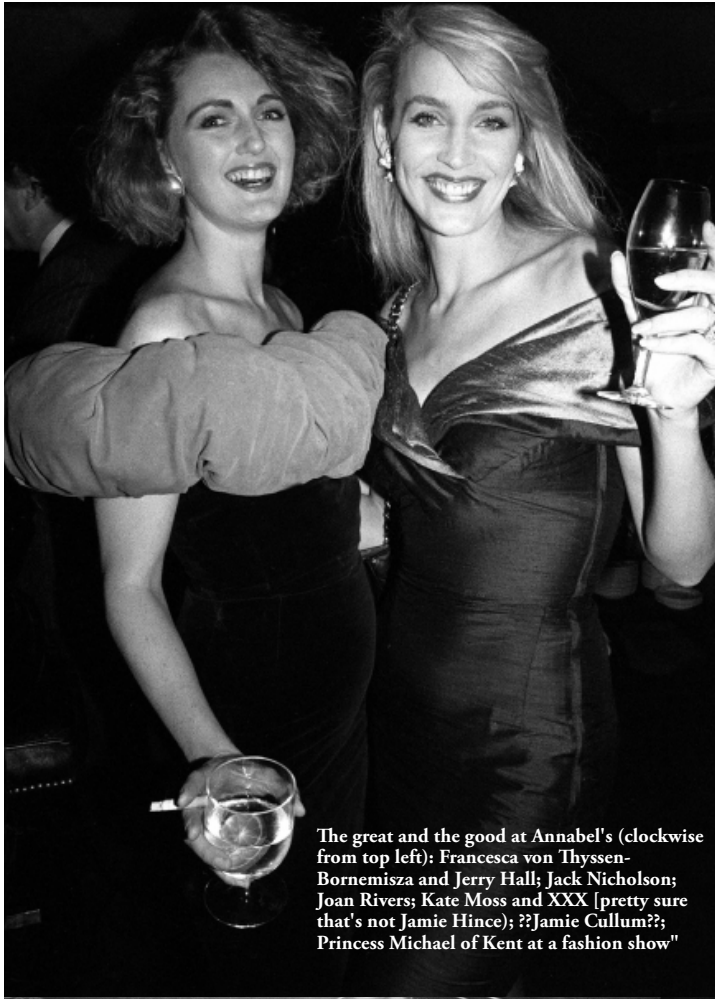
Yokoyama is helping to shape the identity of this British institution. Several of Testino's subjects, such as Kate Moss, are frequent players here already, while Tilbury harbours precious rites-of-passage memories: 'I've been visiting Annabel's ever since I was a teenager and created many a magical moment there.' She'll be devising make-up for female members of staff, and promises, intriguingly, to create London's most beautiful powder rooms.

The success of any club, however, is determined not by its heritage but by the members who frequent it and a sprinkling of magic conjured only by chance. Bars director Luis Simone has no problem imagining that the new-look Annabel's will share the frisson of its predecessor: 'The main bar will be designed with comfort and a sense of conviviality at its core; while, in the nightclub, the bar will feed off the energy of the restaurant and dancefloor, seeping into the intimate hidden snugs.'

And with a string of illustrious names already lined up to grace the gilded threshold, it looks like the next chapter in the history of Annabel's will have no trouble writing itself. **M**

[annabels.co.uk](http://annabels.co.uk)

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The great and the good at Annabel's (clockwise from top left): Francesca von Thyssen-Bornemisza and Jerry Hall; Jack Nicholson; Joan Rivers; Kate Moss and XXX [pretty sure that's not Jamie Hince); ??Jamie Cullum?; Princess Michael of Kent at a fashion show"

