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The Return of Victor Drai

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TELLER (AND SHAKESPEARE)

When Victor Drai takes a stroll down memory lane, there's an awful lot to see.



The Return of Victor Drai

On the eve of a quartet of openings, the originator of Las Vegas's after-hours scene is ready for what some are calling a comeback. But in fact, he may have been running the show all along.

BY MICHAEL KAPLAN

The last time I saw nightlife impresario Victor Drai, it was 2009 and he was wearing a stylishly snug, beautifully tailored sport jacket. Gorgeous women surrounded him as he stepped out of his perfectly refurbished, circa 1980s stretch limo that then-XS managing partner Cy Waits liked to call the Drai-mobile. His club XS at Encore was new, a spacey-looking John Mayer had buzzed over to hang out, and Drai held court in his favorite booth, with its unobstructed view of the action. Late last year, I encounter him again, at the walk-up lunch counter at Bally's. Waiting in line, he's wearing a slightly floppy hat, a suede jacket frayed at the edges, and jeans half-tucked into a pair of black boots. It's the kind of hobo-chic ensemble that takes a lot of élan to pull off, and Drai easily carries the day with it.

He spots me and suggests that we abandon the lunch counter for Burger Brasserie in the adjacent Paris. Walking over, we pass the temporary headquarters of his nightclub Drai's After Hours and what is now the

Indigo Lounge, the cocktail lounge he launched in time for New Year's Eve. A bit south on the Strip, he's running bottle service for Britney at Planet Hollywood. And of course, across Flamingo Road, at what was once Bill's Gamblin' Hall & Saloon and will soon be The Cromwell, Caesars Entertainment's 188-room boutique hotel, Drai is getting set to open an eponymous dayclub/nightclub that promises to be the jewel in his crown. Downstairs will be a touched-up version of the 17-year-old after-hours club that made his name synonymous with louche living. "People like to tell me that they *used to* go there," Drai says. "They think it's naughty. But really it isn't. In fact, it has no more drugs than any other club and probably less alcohol."

Settled in at a table at the Brasserie, he fields a couple of calls involving an errant furniture delivery, ending them with strings of French-inflected obscenities. Asked to describe the new club, an instantly composed Drai says, "It's going to be the most beautiful club in the world. The color scheme is pink and black, the sound system is by Funktion One, and the lighting cost \$5 million. I am totally nuts about lighting." The club has indoor and outdoor components, a DJ booth visible from the dance floor

but not the entrance (“They are two different experiences, darling,” he says gently), and at each table there are iPhone chargers. At 70,000 square feet it’s much bigger than XS, and according to Draï, its \$92 million budget is considerably higher.

What you won’t see there is a gaggle of celebrity DJs. Draï has never been a big fan of the Vegas DJ craze. In fact, although he arguably started it all by programming house music at Draï’s After Hours when rap and Top 40 ruled local dance floors, he seems repulsed by the idea of DJs eclipsing the club itself. “The problem with DJs is that the club doesn’t even feel like a club anymore. It feels more like a concert,” he says. “Everybody got nervous and started outbidding each other, and now the clubs can’t make money. Hakkasan makes \$100 million a year gross and \$15 million in profit. When I was at Wynn, we made 69 percent profit. And the DJ scene is getting very boring. As good and wonderful as Calvin Harris is, you have him here every week. I believe that if you give them the most beautiful club they have ever seen, they will have an experience with the club that is more important than the DJ. I’ll pay \$50,000 or \$100,000, but I won’t pay \$400,000, which is what some of the others pay. I won’t be controlled by the DJs.”

“My goal was to be rich enough at 30 to do what I want and to have the most beautiful woman on my arm. That actually happened by age 26.”

If Victor Draï understands anything, it’s how to create things that people will pay to see and wear and experience. Now 66 years old, he was born in Morocco, spent his teenage years in Paris, and never worked for anybody other than himself. At age 21, he launched his own fashion line called Vicadam, famous for its velvet jeans. He’s always had his priorities straight. “From the start, beautiful women were my goal; I knew I had to work hard to have pretty girls,” Draï says, vacillating between a beer and a vanilla shake to go with his burger. “My goal in life was to be rich enough at 30 to do what I want and to have the most beautiful woman on my arm. That actually happened by the time I was 26.”

His plan exceeded expectations in 1974, when Draï met the movie star Jacqueline Bisset in the first-class section of a transcontinental flight. They quickly became an item; he ditched his fashion company and moved with her to LA. Bisset liked the fact that Draï wasn’t in the film business, so he stayed out of it. After they broke up, he began producing movies. His first release, *The Woman in Red*, came out in 1984 and featured Kelly LeBrock, one of the most desirable actresses in Hollywood at the time. Draï married her the same year the film hit theaters. But by the time he produced the infamous *Weekend at Bernie’s*, a dark comedy about a couple of goofballs pretending their dead boss is still alive, their relationship was as lifeless as the title character.

In 1993, three years after divorcing LeBrock and marrying 22-year-old Loryn Locklin, Draï, at 45, fathered his first child and wanted more

stability. So he opened the restaurant Draï’s in LA. The place was a huge hit with the Hollywood crowd and Dominick Dunne’s central hangout spot for his *Vanity Fair* coverage of the O.J. Simpson trial. “There was a mix of movie stars, studio executives, and billionaires,” Draï recalls. “You couldn’t get a table unless you knew me, and even then it was hard. One night we turned away Sean Connery. He was so hot about it that he didn’t come back for two years.”

In 1998, Draï brought his restaurant and club concept to Vegas, setting up shop in the basement of the old Barbary Coast, in a space that had previously housed the world’s largest McDonald’s. It might have been decrepit, but Draï loved the location: right on the corner of Flamingo and the Strip.

In a town that was just beginning to get hip, Draï’s after-hours spot was a smash. “If you didn’t want to go to bed, you went to Draï’s,” he says. “Clooney, Paris Hilton, Leonardo DiCaprio—they were all there. And I never gave it away for free. I always made everybody pay.” If they didn’t want to, he adds, “they could find somebody else to pay, but not me. If they get pissed off and leave, I say, ‘Leave.’ They need the place more than I need them.”

In 2004, when Steve Wynn was planning Wynn Las Vegas and still operating out of the Desert Inn, Draï suggested setting up a nightclub inside the empty hotel building. “When you want to blow, you blow,” he told Wynn, referring to the building’s impending implosion. “We’ll shut it down.”

Instead, Wynn tried to tap Draï to run La Bete (French for “the beast”), the club that would be in his new place. But negotiations faltered. Draï remembers insisting that the club had a lot of problems—and fearing that the casino mogul would usurp his ideas. “They didn’t take my ideas. I predicted that they would die. And guess what happened.” He waits a beat before braying, “They diiiied!”

A month or so later, Draï received the call to come fix La Bete. “I said, ‘I will take over, but you know my condition: If I hit the numbers, then you stay out of my hair. Also, the beast has to go.’” The beast? “Yes. There was a 90-foot waterfall and lagoon that cost \$10 million. Nobody can beat that. But in the middle of it was a giant eight-foot *beast!* It was terrible.”

The beast went. The club was renamed Tryst, and Draï got a 30 percent stake in the place, he says. “They dreamed of doing \$6 million a year. The first year, I did \$28 million, and \$32 million the year after that. I saved the f---ing hotel!”

When Encore was in the planning stages, Draï won the bid to do another club there. This one turned out to be XS, Las Vegas’s super-club of super-clubs. He found himself again owning Vegas nightlife from 11 PM until 8 in the morning. I tell Draï that it must have been a dream situation, particularly for attracting women. “It would have been a dream situation for some, but in my case it was the same as always,” he says. “I get the girls anyway. Plus, I like being in relationships. [For] seven years, 10 years—I like my relationships.”

As seems to be the norm for Draï, his relationship with Wynn lasted eight years. “Steve was a great partner; we had the number-one club and



Drai and Jacqueline Bisset in the late '70s.



Drai's rooftop nightclub and beach club will anchor The Cromwell, opening this spring.



Drai and former wife Kelly LeBrock at the Oscars in 1985.



Tryst, one of Drai's former clubs.

changed the nightclub business in Las Vegas," Drai says. "Steve doesn't care about money. He spends the money he has to spend."

So why did Drai leave? "I left because Steve started telling me what to do. I told him to f--- off. I said, 'You don't tell me sh--. That is our deal.' He paid me lots of money to leave." Pressed for a number, he says, "It was under \$20 million. I was making [almost] that every year. I owned a third of the club, so I made \$15 million a year. But I was happy to leave."

On the eve of his Las Vegas resurrection, with the reopened Drai's After Hours, Drai's Nightclub, and Drai's Pool Club all getting ready to debut (not to mention Indigo and the gay club Laison, which will move permanently into the temporary Drai's After Hours space at Bally's), Drai says he's excited about his future here. His name is as powerful as ever. And he adds that Steve Wynn told him he has been banned from Wynn

and Encore for fear that he will poach nightlife talent.

"I don't need to go there to take people," he says, laughing and shrugging. "People want to work for me. I have the best team in town. You have 10 or 12 great nightclub hosts in all of Vegas. Five of them are working for me now."

While that might be a matter of opinion, harder to dispute is that Drai has returned to Vegas nightlife in a big way. He'll be opening his spots against no new competitors and seems to have more freedom and more control than ever before. After showing a tiny bit of doubt by saying he hopes he's doing everything right, Drai revs right back up and tries to quantify aesthetics. "I think my new place will be five times prettier than XS. When people see it, they will want to come back and party and have a good time. It's going to be insane." **V**