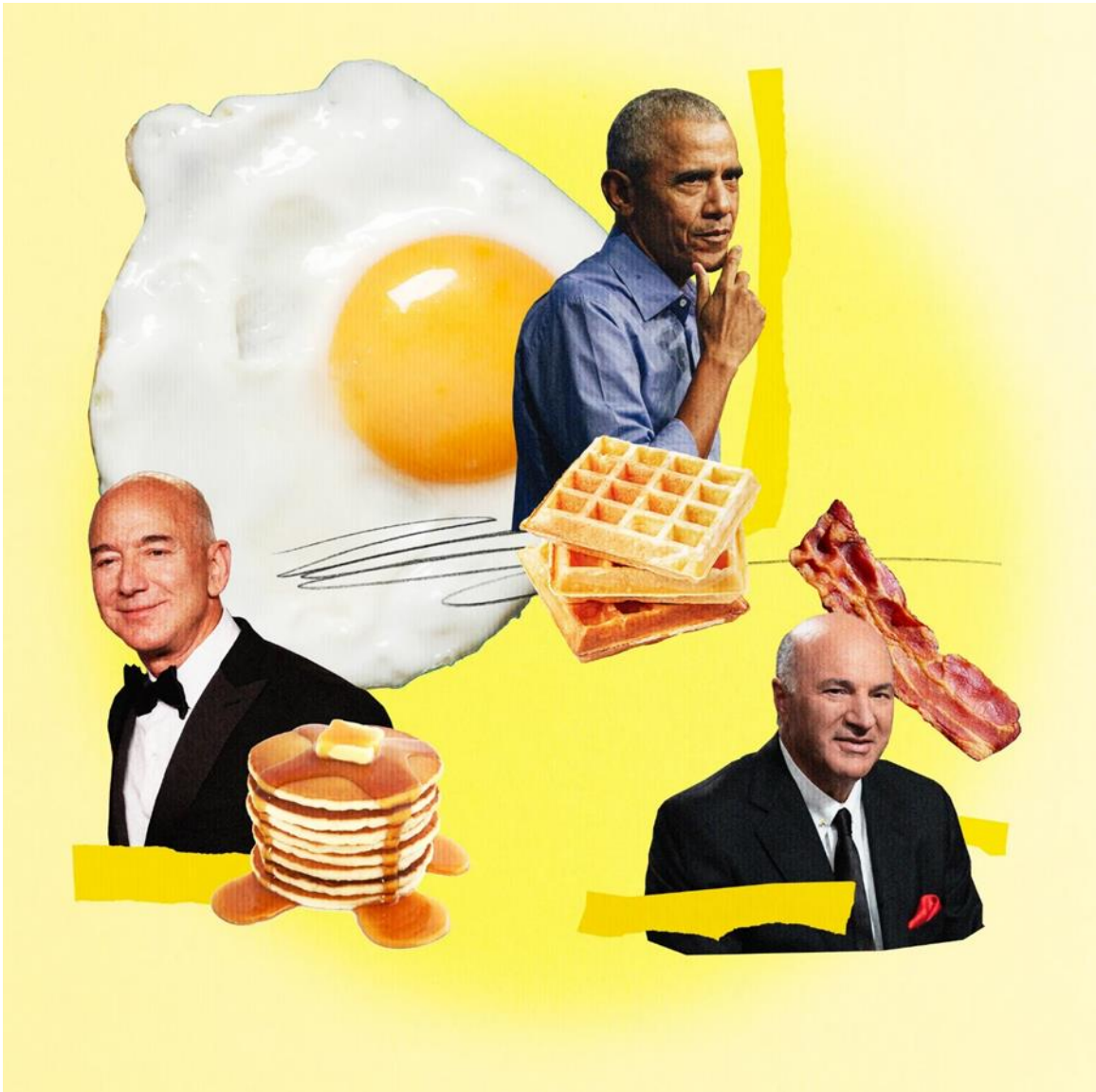


# VANITY FAIR



## POWER BREAKFAST CLUB

Obama, Bezos, and Mr. Wonderful: Inside the Hash House of Harvard's Elite

**Henrietta's Table** might not look like a three-star restaurant—but its clientele would have you guessing otherwise. “There’s no telling who you’re going to see,” says one patron, while another dubs it “a global nexus.”

BY [ANDREW ZUCKER](#)  
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In 2010, **Derrick Rossi** and **Ken Chien**, then colleagues at the Harvard Stem Cell Institute, found themselves attending another coworker's wedding. During the reception, after the "I do's," Rossi asked Chien a question, one that would lead to the creation of Moderna, the multibillion-dollar Covid-19 vaccine maker. "I have this finding and I'm thinking about starting a company. Would you like to hear about it?" Back at Chien's lab, Rossi mentioned that **Robert Langer**, another academic, was also interested in joining the founding group. When it came to where they might discuss the venture as a trio, Chien had just the place in mind: "I said, 'Let's have breakfast at Henrietta's,' because that's kind of the place that people go to."

Every city with movers and shakers has a power breakfast spot. New York? The Loews Regency. Washington, DC? It's a small schlep to the Georgetown Four Seasons. Los Angeles? The Polo Lounge. So it should come as no surprise that Harvard University, a city-within-a-city, has its own stomping ground, with enough hungry power players to field a panel at Davos.

Henrietta's Table, an airy farm-to-table restaurant in the heart of Harvard Square, is nestled on the second floor of the **Bill Gates**-backed Charles Hotel, the see-and-be-seen spot for billionaires, academics, billionaire academics, world leaders, venture capitalists, newspaper columnists, Harvard parents who are all of those things, and Mr. Wonderful, the guy who always sits in the middle of the *Shark Tank* dais. "You can talk to people in London, Geneva, Dubai, Abu Dhabi, Hong Kong, they've all been there," Mr. Wonderful, aka **Kevin O'Leary**, tells me. "It's a global nexus."

Henrietta's first opened its doors in 1995, long before hipsters laid claim to the farm-to-table movement. The Charles Hotel had opened 10 years prior and quickly became the go-to luxury spot in an area dotted with bed-and-breakfasts and buildings as old as John Harvard himself. At the time, Harvard Square was still a few decades away from turning into the Disney Springs shopping village of the Ivy League.

Today, the cityscape looks very different. And while many mom-and-pop shops have since been replaced with eateries elegant and extravagant, Henrietta's Table remains the go-to spot. "You know that the service is going to be good, the food is going to be good," says **Ashish Jha**, a former Harvard professor who later joined the Biden administration to oversee its Covid-19 pandemic response plan. "Henrietta's has a reliability that makes the actual act of eating breakfast almost sort of in the background."

Just over half the diners are affiliated with Harvard, according to **Alex Attia**, the hotel's general manager. The restaurant "often seems to function like an auxiliary [sic] faculty club," **Martha Minow**, a Harvard Law School professor and former CBS Corporation board member wrote over email. The 200-seat interior is coastal grandmother meets colonial Williamsburg (Virginia, not Brooklyn), with a Revolution-era terminology to match (dinner is "supper" and the kitchen whips up \$15 "red flannel hash"). The slat chairs, simple menu, and open kitchen make it feel like you're dining in a New England country home instead of a stuffy, soulless hotel. "It's home cooking, it's the typical eggs and bacon and hash that you can make at home if you want," Attia says. "That's the focus of the menu." The most popular items include the \$18 french toast (a [favorite](#) of early-riser **Al Roker**) and \$14 yogurt parfait.

Unlike the Regency or the Four Seasons, you'll find that restaurant chatter extends well beyond the world of politics and high finance, with academia always in the mix. Attia says Harvard University president **Claudine Gay** is a regular. ("This is her place for breakfasts and for dinners," he notes.) Attia, who took the helm in 2003, bops from table to table, greeting a *who's who* of influential figures every morning. Broadway bigwig **Diane Paulus** is known to break bread there and Snap Inc. chairman **Michael Lynton** has been spotted too. "There's no telling who you're going to see, from governors to mayors to **Jeff Bezos**, **Henry Kissinger**," Harvard basketball coach **Tommy Amaker** says.

When Amaker was hired to coach Harvard's basketball team in 2007, he asked the late Harvard law professor Charles J. Ogletree Jr. to breakfast at Henrietta's. The two had gotten to know each other as Amaker became acclimated at Harvard. By the end of their meal, Amaker asked Ogletree if they could do it again. Ogletree brought a few other professors with him the following time, setting in motion "[the breakfast club](#)," a monthly get-together of famous faces and members of the Harvard basketball team. Amaker tells me speakers have included President **Barack Obama**, three Massachusetts governors, Senator **Raphael Warnock**, former education secretary (and former Harvard basketball player) **Arne Duncan**, and **Jacinda Ardern**, the former prime minister of New Zealand, among many others. According to Amaker, the breakfast club has become so popular that people running for office now ask him if they can speak at the gathering. "It's that kind of room, they know it. It has that kind of cachet."

When Obama, a Harvard Law School graduate, came to speak to Amaker's group last year, he noted the personal significance of returning to Henrietta's, a restaurant he was familiar with during the early stages of his relationship with the former first lady, **Michelle Obama**. "He said it was always the nicest. He said, 'I didn't have a lot of money then,'" Amaker recounted, so "for us to be able to eat at Henrietta's was a big deal."

**Nick Kristof**, the globe-trotting *New York Times* opinion columnist and a former member of Harvard University's Board of Overseers, has spent many nights at the Charles Hotel and run into many a world leader there. So, naturally, the hotel's main breakfast spot is where the mighty start their day. "Henrietta's Table is the world's crossroads," he wrote in an email. "I've run into everyone there from Madeline Albright to Sudan's foreign minister to Yemen's Nobel Peace Prize winner."

Back in the 1990s, when Kevin O'Leary was building what later became known as The Learning Company, Henrietta's was a *Shark Tank* of its own. O'Leary, ever the dealmaker, knew that venture capitalists would spot him at the restaurant with rival firms, drumming up even more interest in the company. "We raised billions at The

Learning Company,” O’Leary says. “I always made sure that we’d start [at Henrietta’s], and we’d do two or three meetings there, and everybody would know that we were negotiating.”

Since then, the restaurant has, to a certain extent, preserved its reputation as a prime destination for dealmaking. “If you didn’t want people to know that you were meeting with this or that Senator or member of Congress or something, you would avoid Henrietta’s Table,” says **Larry Tribe**, a Harvard Law School professor and a frequent political commentator. Still, Tribe adds, “If people had confidential dealings that they wanted to engage in, that’s probably the last place they’d go.”

It’s also become a hot spot for chance encounters, where diners like Jha would shoot the breeze with people they wouldn’t typically have time to see. “The idea of running into other people was never consciously in my head,” he says, “but the number of times I went there for breakfast and ran into somebody I knew was way more often than times when I didn’t.”

But of course, it’s not all muckety-mucks. Sitting just feet away from cabinet secretaries, media moguls, and famous academics are a few groggy students visiting their grandparents, unaware of the powerful luminaries surrounding them. It’s not the Nobel Prize, but waking up in time to behold such a towering tableau is something.