

Singles Get Together Over Dinner and Languages

By ANDREE BROOKS

Rather than head home to eat dinner alone in her Queens apartment one recent Monday night, Rose Menlowe went instead to practice her Spanish and meet some friends in the private dining room of a restaurant on East 50th Street.

It was here that Miss Menlowe, a decorator and foreign-language enthusiast, knew she could enjoy a meal in the company of like-minded language buffs. "I could learn something useful," she said, as she sipped her cocktail and struggled with a few Spanish phrases, "and I was sure I would run into a nicer crowd than at singles places."

Four Months Ago

Started on a whim just four months ago by Barry Farber, the late-night talk-show host, the Language Club is one of many social, cultural and athletic organizations attracting an increasing number of single people over 40 years old.

The club, becoming as sought after as a Broadway taxi on a rainy night, is planning a second section, on Wednesday nights, at another restaurant. Satellite chapters offering lunch get-togethers in Brooklyn and Queens are being established.

Its secret, say the regulars, is that it captures the burgeoning interest in foreign-language study among business and professional people, with a format that is the quintessence of the New York singles life style of the 80's.

Not all the regulars are single; that

was not the original intent. But among the 92, a record number, who showed up one recent Monday night, only a handful were married. Why? "It's the perfect way to meet someone who shares the same passion," said Roselle Warshaw, a dark-haired high-school teacher whose name tag indicated she was eager to practice French and Spanish.

And practice they did. They filtered off into groups. In the French cluster le sujet was the Sorbonne. Nearby, among the Spanish speakers el sujeto was pen friendships.

For instance, Richard Fried, an accountant from Brooklyn, was explaining to Cecilia Garcia, a secretary originally from Colombia, how he exchanged letters with a friend in Argentina when not occupied looking up Albanian grammar at the New York Public Library.

Meanwhile, in another corner it was strictly Yiddish spoken here. Barbara Kaufman, a real-estate broker, was carefully explaining the difference between a shmo, a shlemiel and a shlimazel.

Askoy Sevil, a belly dancer, was there to practice Turkish. Leon Fleisher, an international marketing executive, needed to practice his Italian. John Carlo, a Soviet-studies student from C. W. Post College in Huntington, L.I., was cruising the room looking for a Russian conversation. Overheard also were smatterings of Mandarin Chinese, Hebrew, Arabic and even Swahili.

Mr. Farber said the idea of a lan-

guage club was the culmination of a lifetime dream of sharing his interest in linguistics and languages: He claims fluency in eight. During his school days in Greensboro, N.C., he chose Italian over Latin, "because Italian was Latin with the difficulty removed." Not too many years later, he said, he was busy perfecting his skills in Norwegian, Swedish, Danish, Russian, Mandarin Chinese, Hungarian and Serbo-Croatian. The problem was that few shared that love.

Dozens of Letters

It was only this January, when he took over an afternoon call-in talk show and one day breezily asked listeners to write to him if they shared his infatuation with languages, that he discovered how many soul mates he actually had. "We got dozens of letters," he said. "Then someone said why don't we start a club."

He found a restaurant — La Maganette at Third Avenue and 50th Street — that agreed to provide space, one drink and an Italian meal of salad, meatballs, sausage and ziti for \$10 a head.

Everyone, he decided, would be given a name tag festooned with the flag colors of the country whose language he or she was willing to speak or wanted to learn. Small flags would be set in the center of each table indicating the language that would be spoken there that night.

During dinner Mr. Farber or a guest would make a presentation, ei-

ther tell stories or talk about a topic of interest concerning one language or another. Those talks would range from "my funniest mistakes" to "phrases the phrase book never taught you." And to underscore the serious side of the gathering a large table would be set up with items for sale ("We call it our duty-free shop," said Mr. Farber) with language cassettes and texts to reinforce the learning process.

Last week this was expanded to include minilessons at the restaurant ("a language house call," quipped Mr. Farber) with teachers from the Language Lab, a nearby language learning and translation center.

There was no large-scale publicity. Participants were asked to pass the word among their friends. However, a few small notices were placed in appropriate newsletters, such as the Mensa monthly bulletin, and Mr. Farber talked about it on the air.

It began very slowly, then started to take off, at a speed that surprised even its founder. "It was amazing how soon we began to turn a profit," he said proudly, ticking off plans for the second restaurant location (Jack's Nest at 59 West 56th Street each Wednesday), as well as borough luncheon chapters to cater in particular to retired people who cannot get out at night. ■

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