

'Have the time of your life!': Dirty Dancing hotel to be reborn

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"Nobody puts Baby in the corner."

Millions of viewers have swooned over that line, uttered by Patrick Swayze's motorcycle jacket-clad working-class hoofer in the 1987 film *Dirty Dancing*. What follows is one of the most iconic dance numbers ever set to film: a sexy, sweaty pas de deux between Swayze and the frizzy-haired naïf "Baby", played by Jennifer Grey, who meets her dance instructor at a hotel in the Catskills. He caresses her body. They cha-cha. They spin and press up against one another. Then, as the soundtrack blares *I've had the time of my life*, she runs and leaps into his arms. Swayze lifts her high above his head. The crowd erupts in applause.

With its nostalgic 1960s soundtrack, sultry dance numbers and electrifying chemistry between its two young stars, *Dirty Dancing* was an instant classic that has seduced viewers for nearly 40 years. Even Gen Z has fallen for the film, with TikTokers trying to recreate the famous "lift" from its final scene.



Patrick Swayze and Jennifer Grey

Alamy

Yet the real-life hotel that inspired [Dirty Dancing](#) closed its doors a year before the movie hit theatres. The Grossinger's Catskill Resort Hotel was known as the Waldorf of the Catskills, the belle of the Borscht Belt — the most beloved of the 500 or so Jewish-owned hotels that once dotted the mountains of southeast New York. But it was demolished in 2018, and the final dilapidated building on its property burned down in 2022. It seemed dead.

Until now. A Florida developer has bought the 1,000-acre site of the legendary hotel, promising to revive it as a year-round luxury resort and residential destination. Its plan includes 100 hotel rooms, two golf courses, a polo and equestrian centre, a farm, a sports complex, restaurants and a spa with wellness offerings.

The timing couldn't be better. The hotel is in the midst of a pop culture revival. A new documentary, *We Met at Grossinger's*, directed by Paula Eiselt, has received a rapturous response on the festival circuit and will begin its theatrical rollout in November. A scripted series called *The Mountains* is also in the works, based on Jennie Grossinger and Elaine Grossinger Etes, the mother-daughter duo who ran the hotel for more than half a century combined.

It makes sense, said Mitchell Etesse — Jennie's grandson and Elaine's son — who grew up on the hotel grounds. The Hudson Valley has experienced a population spike in recent years. "The western part of the [Catskills](#) is thriving," he said. But Grossinger's has more going for it than just a prime location.

Even beyond *Dirty Dancing*, the resort "has had such an impact on so many people", said Etesse, who has attended several screenings of *We Met at Grossinger's* across the country. "People come up to me and comment: 'I spent summers at Grossinger's with my family' ... or 'My parents got married there,' 'My parents met there,' 'I was conceived there' — I've had that told to me several times," he added, chuckling. Etesse himself met his wife at the hotel. "I had got back from college, working as the resident manager or something, and she was a hotel cashier," he said. "I walked down the stairs one day and saw her, and it was love at first sight."

"It was a very special place," Susan Etesse, Mitchell's older sister, added. "I think a lot of people are nostalgic for those good times. People want to go back and remember that time."

A haven for celebrities — from Liz Taylor to Jerry Seinfeld

For American Jews on the East Coast in the 1940s, 1950s and 1960s, the Grossinger's Catskill Resort Hotel was the most magical place on earth.



The Grossinger's Catskill Resort Hotel

Universal History Archive/Universal Images Group/Getty

Mel Brooks, Joan Rivers and Jerry Seinfeld did stand-up acts for guests there. Stars [Eddie Fisher](#) and Debbie Reynolds tied the knot there. Illustrious guests included Jackie Robinson, Paul Newman, Charlton Heston, [Elizabeth Taylor](#) (whom Fisher brought to the hotel after dumping Reynolds for her) and the former first lady Eleanor Roosevelt, who is thought to have loved the pickled herring.

"When I was little, I asked my mother, 'Do I know anybody famous?'" recalled Susan, whose grandparents, Jennie and Harry Grossinger, owned the joint. Her mum, Elaine Grossinger Etes, started rattling off names: Joel Grey (the future *Cabaret* star who danced and yucked it up at Grossinger's nightclub); Fisher, the crooner who got his start pushing toboggans up Grossinger's slides in the winter; Reynolds, the *Singin' in the Rain* sweetheart who had Susan Etes as her flower girl at her wedding to Fisher.

"I said, 'But they're just your friends!'"



Eddie Fisher and Debbie Reynolds tied the knot there

Bettmann

Grossinger's "was bigger than life", said Barry Lewis, a trustee at the Borscht Belt Museum and retired newspaper editor, whose father performed at Grossinger's in the 1960s. Lewis went for the first time when he was about ten and was agog. "It had chandeliers in its indoor pool!"

At its peak, Grossinger's boasted 35 buildings, two Olympic-sized pools, a golf course, tennis courts, a skating rink, a ski slope with a snow-making machine, a nightclub and a wood-paneled dining room that could seat 1,300. There were other fine Borscht Belt hotels — opened by Jews at a time when other establishments banned their presence — but Grossinger's was the *crème de la crème*. It was even once name-checked in a Bugs Bunny cartoon.

"It had this wonderful mystique," Lewis said.



Actor Charlton Heston and his wife Lydia Clarke enjoying time off in the Catskill Mountains 1952

AP

Disneyland with knishes

The Grossingers had not set out to open a hotel. Farmer Selig Grossinger came to the US from what is now modern-day [Poland](#) in 1897, looking for a better life. His wife, Malka, and young daughters, Jennie and Lottie, joined him in Manhattan's Lower East Side three years later. Money was tight, and Jennie left school in sixth grade to work at a buttonhole factory in the Garment District.

Around 1913, due to Selig's poor health, he, Malka and Jennie moved to a farm in the Catskills. When the land proved too rocky to yield crops, they took in boarders. "My great-grandmother had been an innkeeper back in Poland," Susan said. "She was a wonderful cook, and my grandmother was a wonderful hostess."

Malka was “mum” to guests, presiding over the kosher kitchen, while Jennie — hair perfectly coiffed in a curled bouffant — flitted about, making sure everyone was comfortable, taken care of and had a fourth player for mahjong.

“I remember seeing Jennie Grossinger all over the place,” said Naomi Lufkin, a 73-year-old psychotherapist who spent a few childhood summers at the hotel with her parents. “She was always there greeting everybody, specifically outside the dining room, wishing everybody *Shabbat Shalom*.”



Jennie Grossinger with Elizabeth Taylor and Eddie Fisher

“She knew almost all the guests, many by name,” Susan said. “She knew everybody and knew where they sat in the dining room.”

In 1919, the Grossingers — who now included Jennie Grossinger's husband Harry, a distant cousin — sold their modest seven-room boarding house and bought a 100-acre property in which to build their kosher Shangri-La.

"It was Disneyland with knishes," said Robert Friedman, CEO of Bungalow Media, who spearheaded and produced *We Met at Grossinger's*.

"It was aspirational: many Jews had never done sports before, and here they learned to play baseball, to play golf," Friedman added. But most of all, "people felt comfortable there".

At the time, many Jews who wanted to escape the unbearable heat of the city had few options. Signs outside resorts or pools said things like, "No Jews or dogs allowed" or "Privileges of the swimming pool are extended only to approved gentiles". *The Jewish Vacation Guide*, which published a list of lodgings that allowed Jewish visitors in 1917, served as a model for the now-famous *Negro Motorist Green Book*, first published in 1936.



The indoor pool at Grossinger's in 1960.

Bettmann



The dining room

Bettmann

Grossinger's — along with many of the other Jewish Catskills resorts — “was a safe place, away from antisemitism”, Friedman pointed out. It also welcomed non-white communities, such as blacks and Latinos.

Grossinger's was, however, more than a hotel. The offerings were dizzying. You could attend a lecture on contemporary literature, watch boxer Barney Ross train for a fight, or shop at the store under the Terrace Room, stocked with exquisite clothes. “My father got my mother this beautiful lace dress with a jacket, and then they bought me this little sweater,” Steven Schwartz, a psychotherapist, said. “I still can see it — with a little white fur collar.”

You could play a round of golf or take an archery lesson or dance the cha-cha with hunky instructor Schwartz, the rumoured inspiration for Swayze's heartthrob in *Dirty Dancing*. "Every two weeks there was another 'Baby'," the 90-year-old Schwartz said in *We Met at Grossinger's*. Sometimes, he added, there was a "Baby's mother." (Just like in the movie, these cougars — who spent the week at the resort while their husbands stayed in the city to work — were called "bungalow bunnies".)

Meanwhile, Olympians put on diving shows. Comic entertainers known as "tumblers" roamed the grounds, like Brooks, who got fired after he jumped into the pool wearing a suit and carrying a briefcase full of rocks. They'd also goad guests into a game of "Simon Says", which was — no joke — invented at Grossinger's.

"Lou Goldstein was the big mucky muck that led 'Simon Says' every morning," Lufkin said, laughing at the memory. "I'd go with my parents outside after breakfast, and he would be there doing 'Simon Says', and he would crack everybody up."

Families would dress in elegant attire for dinner — served by nice Jewish boys studying medicine or law. (Grossinger's, by the way, had a matchmaker on staff and hosted singles weekends for parents hoping to find their offspring a suitable suitor.) Meals were multiple courses.



Elaine Grossinger Etes with David Etes and Jennie Grossinger in 1959

“The chocolate cookies — that is what I most remember,” said Joseph Mishkin, whose Cuban-Venezuelan father ended up marrying a Grossinger after spending one of the high holidays at the hotel. “Especially coming from Venezuela ... ice cream sandwiches — we didn’t have that.”

In 2018, the hit show *The Marvelous Mrs Maisel* depicted this abundant glamour over several episodes in its second season: the feasts, the shuffleboard, the talent shows, the sometimes-ribald stand-up and, most of all, the snazzy midcentury clothes. ("The whole *Mrs Maisel* thing really kind of resparked the Catskills," Mitchell said.)

After putting the kids to bed, the grown-ups could catch stand-up comedy or a concert at one of the clubs. Scratched into the hotel's grand piano were the signatures of George and Ira Gershwin, Rita Moreno, Taylor, Al Jolson and many more. (Elaine kept the piano till her death in February of this year. It's now at the Borscht Belt Museum.)

"I remember watching my parents going to a Saturday night show all dressed up," Susan said. Sometimes, she and Mitchell were allowed to catch a performance, like the time Lesley Gore appeared at the Playhouse. "I was following her around before the show, going up to her room, and she had the set list," Mitchell said. "I must have been four."

Doomed by 'the three As'

At first, Elaine Grossinger Etess did not want to follow in her mother's footsteps. She resented that Jennie Grossinger had spent so much time attending to the needs of others that she often forgot about her own daughter. "As my mother said in the documentary, the governess picked her up at the hospital and the governess stayed with her till she dropped her off at college," Susan said. Elaine "wanted to be a mother first". She was a Brownie Girl Scout leader and a member of their local garden club. But, one day, her brother Paul Etess asked her if she would help pick out some new carpets for the place. As Jennie largely retired to Florida, Elaine adopted her role. In 1972, after Jennie's death, she and Paul took over ownership of Grossinger's.



Elaine with Jennie and Harry Grossinger

But, by that time, the Catskills was losing its cultural cachet. Lewis, of the Borscht Belt Museum, said that people often blame “the three As”: aviation (“suddenly people could travel anywhere in the world”), air conditioning (“people don’t have to escape the city”) and, eventually, Atlantic City (“people want to gamble”). But also, the next generation coming of age in the late 1960s had changed. “The thing that had made the Catskills so popular is really what drove a lot of people away. They didn’t want the food of their parents and their grandparents,” Lewis said. “They wanted bacon at breakfast. They wanted regular milk. They didn’t need the shows where the comedians were doing punchlines in Yiddish.”

The Grossingers sold the hotel in 1986 for \$9 million. The owners got Fisher to come and pretend to demolish the resort’s playhouse as a gag, to symbolise its new beginnings. But nothing ever became of it. It changed hands three times before permanently closing its doors.



A lawn chair sits as nature takes over the indoor pool area of the hotel

John Moore/Getty

This time, the descendants hope things will be different. *Dirty Dancing* may have made Grossinger's immortal — even if the resort was called Kellerman's in the movie — but a new crop of holidaymakers and New York transplants flocking to the Hudson Valley since Covid means that the hotel could once again spring to life, attracting a new generation of celebrities.

"I hope it's going to work," Susan Etess said of the new plans for the site that her family built. "Younger people are excited. I'm not sure the interest ever went away, but it's been sparked again."