

Sardi's

"Vincent" Sardi, Sr. and his wife Eugenia (both Italian immigrants) opened their first eatery, The Little Restaurant, at 146 West 44th Street in 1921. When that building was slated for demolition in 1926, they relocated to a new building down the block. The new restaurant, Sardi's, opened March 5, 1927. When business slowed, Sardi sought a gimmick to attract customers. Recalling the movie star caricatures that decorated the walls of Joe Zelli's, a Parisian restaurant and jazz club, Sardi decided to recreate that effect in his establishment. He hired a Russian refugee named Alex Gard to draw Broadway celebrities. Sardi and Gard drew up a contract that stated Gard would make the caricatures in exchange for one meal per day at the restaurant. The first official caricature by Gard was of Ted Healy, the vaudevillian of Three Stooges fame. When Sardi's son, Vincent Sardi, Jr. took over restaurant operations in 1947, he offered to change the terms of Gard's agreement. Gard refused and continued to draw the caricatures in exchange for meals until his death.

Frequent mentions by Walter Winchell and Ward Morehouse added to Sardi's growing popularity. Newspapermen, press agents, and drama critics met for lunch regularly at Sardi's and referred to themselves as the Cheese Club. The restaurant became known as a pre- and post-theater hangout, as well as a location for opening night parties. Sardi, a theater lover, kept the restaurant open much later than others in the area to accommodate Broadway performers' schedules.

After Gard died in 1948, John Mackey took over drawing for the restaurant but was soon replaced by Don Bevan. Bevan did the drawings until 1974 when he retired, and was replaced by Richard Baratz, who continues to the present day as the Sardi's caricaturist. There are more than 1,300 celebrity caricatures on display. In 1979, Vincent Sardi, Jr. donated a collection of 227 caricatures from the restaurant to the Billy Rose Theatre Collection of The New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

In 1932, a Los Angeles location of Sardi's opened on Hollywood Boulevard, where it was similarly popular with celebrities. It has since closed. [<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sardi's>]

