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(SEMI)PRIVATE CLUB

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... a strong, comparatively silent type to White's animated, fast-talking persona. Or, as the guys put it, "white's] Snoop." Born in Chicago, Latimore got his degree in African-American Studies from Georgia's Atlanta State University, then worked as an actor and filmmaker in L.A. before the two crossed paths. "D. and I became fast friends," says White. "The experience of pretty much anyone in White's world is with flipping burgers at McDonald's at the age of 18. My résumé in the hospitality industry is extensive—I was a floor manager of the restaurant (and media) at the age of 44, in New York's swank Royalton Hotel. I was excited about going into business together," says White. "The day Damon called me and said, 'I'm in San Francisco here for several months, I think the time has come for this is the place to go.' We promptly joined forces and the two formed the Otis Restaurant Group. "My goal in making this happen was to have Damon join me as a partner, adding matter-of-factly that he brings a lot of connections and a brick facade of Otis' exterior was already in place. Latimore recruited architect Line Brand Architecture as partner Nico Bini, and interior-design team Nathan Brown and Sheri Brown to finish the glitz. "SF doesn't have anything like what we're taking risks. We've got the gall to say we can take disparate elements together and make something new. We're expecting all sorts of different people to come to the restaurant and do something new too." The disparate elements Bini describes as "sick, oversized, Art Deco, mid-century modern, peacock-print wallpaper, cork flooring, porcelain tile, custom-designed glossy white Louis XV chairs, mirrors, a hanging coral sculpture, Lucite waterfall chandelier, a Moroccan-inspired upstairs lounge. "We're not doing a bad-taste element," Bini explains. "It's 1970s disco, top raunch." As well as being decadent, Deco style, the decor is also eco-friendly. "We've never done it, but, we're local, we're in SF—of course it's local. And while the aforementioned features are done on their own right, a mural by artist Carla Eagleton is a highlight. Beginning in one corner with an Art Deco peacock (the Otis logo), the abstract mural covers the room in gold- and silver-flecked splendor, with a leather design layered on top. "You flip through the paper" and see a new club in London or New York City. "This is our chance," says Brown. "We're drinking the Kool-Aid."

White and Latimore make the gutsy claim that Otis will "be as inclusive as it is exclusive."

One can only take White at his word regarding his community as a whole, but it's impossible to deny the plethora of bold-faced names in the list of investors willing to go public. Todd Traina, Trevor Traina, Simon Thieriot, Patrick Herning, Andy Wasserman, Christine Borders and husband-and-wife couples J. P. and Leslie Thieriot, Montgomery Woods and Anne Robinson and Jim Chapman and Megan Carlson all have a financial stake in Otis' success. "The way this group, many of whom are usually this Balboa Café crowd, is rallying behind this idea—I've never seen them do this," says Otis publicist and Marnach Tyndall PR partner Jennifer Marnach. "These guys have drawn them in."

Talk to Otis investors, and the same themes recur. "He doesn't pitch you," says Channel Business executive Patrick Herning. "Damon's very careful whom he invites into that community."

Todd Traina, an independent film producer based in L.A. who happens to be a member of one of SF's most high-profile families, is also an investor in L.A. ventures Dolce and Geisha. "I was actually pleased that [White] asked me," Traina says. "Maybe I can be a good-luck charm to Otis in my third investment [of this kind], but I get the sense that Damon doesn't need any good luck. Maybe I'm the lucky one."

Traina also sees promise in Otis' SF setting: "The mission statement of being exclusive and inclusive has a

better chance of working in SF than it would in L.A. Too many people in L.A. expect to be included in the 'exclusive.'"

But the question remains: Will laid-back, low-frequency San Francisco really take kindly to a Studio-54-selective setup? "Joe and I have always been imaginative at making something not so hot, hot," says White (who, with Latimore's assistance, could give Paris Hilton a run for her money when it comes to using the word hot). "We've never been motivated by the obvious choice. The first place people think to shop is a mall. That's the last place I think to shop. Therein lies the challenge, and herein lies the answer." The Yoda-like words are par for the course coming from him, but he's not alone in his lofty expectations.

"This city needs a place people can rely on," says Suite One8One owner Andy Wasserman. "I'm in the nightclub business, and [when] I have friends who come into town, I'm kind of embarrassed to tell them I have no clue where to send them during the week—hopefully, Otis will be that ace-in-the-hole place."

Pinning down the lounge's "privacy" policy seems to be the million-dollar question. "I think there's going to be some mixed reactions about it, honestly," says Wasserman. "But it's not about being snobby, it's about creating the right mix. It's private in the sense that not everyone can get in, but not private in the sense that you have to be rich or white or from the right zip code." When Otis opens, its hours of operation will be 2 p.m. to 2 a.m. (with a strategic

MADE IN LANE: Owners Joseph Latimore (left) and Damon White, pictured outside the site of Otis.

