

NASHVILLE

LIFESTYLES

25

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HOMES**

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Rooftops***

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NEW TACOS,
MOCKTAILS
& MORE!***

UNDERGROUND

A New Deal

With House of Cards, Icon Entertainment Group brings a little magic back to downtown.

Bill and Shannon Miller have performed the ultimate sleight of hand trick. With their Icon Entertainment Group, they've transformed an ordinary commercial basement into a downtown attraction designed for locals. Yes, House of Cards is for folks who gave up on Lower Broad after it became bachelorette central. It's a place for people to shed their Smashville t-shirts, dress up (i.e., sports jackets and leather shoes), and leave their phones in their pockets. Thanks to a strictly no-photos policy, no one is Instagramming anything.

That's not the only magic taking place at House of Cards, but it may be the illusion that was hardest to pull off. The restaurant and magic club is the latest offering from Icon, the company that brought Nashville the Johnny Cash Museum, the Patsy Cline Museum, Nudie's Honky Tonk, and the upcoming Merle Haggard Museum. The Millers, who moved to town from California, are members of Los Angeles' famous Magic Castle, a private club for magic aficionados, and modeled House of Cards after their old hangout.

"We want people to feel that this is a special experience," Bill Miller says. "We want you to come here and become immersed in a totally different experience."

The cost of dinner (entrees are \$20 to \$65) at the reservation-only speakeasy includes a ticket to one of six nightly magic shows in the 50-seat theater, as well as visits to magicians and mentalists performing tricks at small tables throughout the space. This isn't dinner theater: At your table, focus on your food, drinks, and conversation. Or get up, wander, and interact with other guests and magicians, or, perhaps, Thurston, a "ghost" piano player who takes requests.

"We want to encourage people to walk around with their drinks and look at everything," Bill says, adding that magicians won't approach patrons who don't want to interact.

The drink menu is particularly inventive, including a table-side punch (\$92-\$100), which includes fruit being cut as you watch, for groups of four or more, and a proprietary Maker's Mark barrel for



select drinks. A rich chicken and mushroom soup and crab cakes are solid starters. The menu includes steaks, salmon, roast chicken, and other steak-house-style fare, with standard sides, like potatoes, Brussels sprouts, and spinach.

This is a 21-and-older entertainment option, although the Millers may add a kid-friendly Sunday brunch in the future. Despite that, this isn't R-rated entertainment (head to Icon's Skull's Rainbow Room for that). There's dining space for 150, plus the bar, but the Vaudeville-esque aesthetic is intimate and also includes a private séance dining room (with a bookcase that becomes a sliding door), a humidor, and an outdoor patio, with a waterfall to block out the noise from Lower Broad.

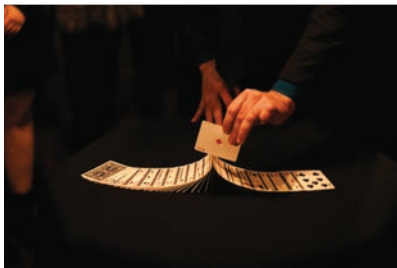
Performing magicians are part comedians, with particular deftness at reading a crowd. It wouldn't be any fun to publish true spoilers here, but, on a recent visit, Jason Michaels, House of Cards' director of entertainment and resident magician, captivated the audience during a lengthy and

entirely silent rope trick. Others performed card tricks and read audience members' minds.

"I think a lot of people will experience magic for the first time, in a way. They will realize that they like magic," Michaels says. "If you are used to a corporate magic show or a nine-year-old's birthday party, this is different."

House of Cards is underneath the Johnny Cash and Patsy Cline museums. Icon built it over the course of a year, doing much of the loud work at night when the museums were shuttered, cutting through the floor of the adjacent building to get large items in. There's a world-class collection of magic memorabilia, including antique playing cards, artfully framed magic posters, a handcuff device that once belonged to Harry Houdini, and a tuxedo from Harry Blackstone, Sr., which had once been on display in Brentwood. The Millers bought it at auction.

"We had to bring it back home," Bill says. (*House of Cards*, 119 Third Ave. S., Lower Level, 615-730-8326; hocrnashville.com) —Margaret Littman



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