



All About the Customer

An Interview with Daniel Boulud,
Chef and Owner, The Dinex Group

EDITORS' NOTE While he is a French native from a small village outside Lyon and trained under some of France's most illustrious chefs, it is in New York that Daniel Boulud has made his name. This chef-turned-restaurateur has won countless awards and is now considered one of America's leading culinary authorities. He is best known as chef-owner of his signature restaurant DANIEL on Manhattan's upper east side, where he has now lived for more than 25 years.



Daniel Boulud

Named Outstanding Restaurateur of the Year by the James Beard Foundation, Boulud first made a name at Le Cirque where he charmed the city's who's who from 1987-1993 with his refined yet soulful cooking.

COMPANY BRIEF The Dinex Group (www.danielnyc.com) owns and operates seven restaurants by Daniel Boulud, four in New York – Daniel, a member of Relais & Châteaux; the newly opened Bar Boulud; DB Bistro Moderne; and Café Boulud – with a second Café Boulud in Palm Beach, Florida, in the luxurious Brazilian Court Hotel; Daniel Boulud Brasserie at the Wynn Las Vegas Resort; and Maison Boulud in Beijing. The Dinex Group's newest projects include a recent Canadian partnership whereby Boulud and his team will oversee Vancouver's renowned Lumière Restaurant and create a new DB Bistro Moderne as a sister restaurant to the New York version. Both will open in November 2008.

Has this market stayed strong through the economic challenges in the U.S.?

It's very difficult to observe the economy problem here, but we feel it. People might do parties, but they might not do them in as grand a style or scale as in the recent past. They might not be as lavish. They might watch the budget. But interestingly enough, in this difficult time in the economy, when most owners would not dare to redo a restaurant, I feel this is the best time for me to renovate Daniel, my most lavish and expensive restaurant. If I didn't own the real estate here at Daniel, I don't think I would go there, but I do own it, so it's not like my lease is going to end and my rent will triple. I've been very successful up until now, and I want to make sure that I reinvest well in my business. This summer,



we are closing Daniel for restoration, and we're going to have a brand new restaurant, which I feel good about, because we will start with a fresh pallet. It's scary, because I feel so comfortable with what I have, but I am excited to see the restaurant's second life unfold.

You have a number of restaurants today, but you talk about Daniel with a lot of passion. Will Daniel always be your baby?

Daniel is what I have worked all my life for; it's what has made me who I am as a chef. I think Daniel has always been not only my passion but the foundation of all my business. But I enjoy doing Café Boulud, which is a step below. Café Boulud is the more casual part of Daniel; it is chic and elegant and has a wonderful clientele. Of course, there's DB Bistro, which is in midtown, just off Broadway, and maybe a more gastronomic bistro than a regular bistro. Having created the DB burger, I think I actually started a trend. Today, burgers are gourmet and trendy. I think DB was certainly the one that put that on the map. With Bar Boulud, which I just opened across the street from Lincoln Center this past winter, I focused on very traditional charcuterie and very classic straightforward French cooking in a way that has made these things new again.

You have also been very successful in Las Vegas.

Yes, Las Vegas is a unique business. It's a unique town that's extremely competitive, but it's also extremely exciting. Vegas has been working hard at becoming a magnet for individuals, corporate travelers, and now even families who travel there for leisure, excitement, entertainment, and even great food. Vegas is a little different, because the people who come to your restaurant vary. There are people who regularly come to Vegas and come to your restaurant every time; there are the locals who go out; there are the conventioners, and it's not the same clientele for the jewelry convention as for the cement convention. So we have this roller coaster of conventions coming in and out, and every time it changes the dynamic of the clientele.

How about Palm Beach?

Palm Beach has been wonderful. It's very seasonal. Café Boulud is in a privileged

location in the center of Palm Beach Island in a very beautiful hotel, The Brazilian Court. The restaurant also has private function rooms, and I think that has helped the most, because we are extremely busy from November to April. In summer, we stay open for the sake of service for the hotel and keeping our staff there, but we accept that the summer season is not profitable. But more and more people are living in Florida and staying there for a longer part of the year than they used to, so those off-season months are getting shorter. The high season is getting a little longer, so it's good.

Are there additional markets that you are looking to move into?

We just opened in China. Going to Asia was a big decision, but I fell in love with the project there. It's the old American Embassy in Beijing, and it's quite a beautiful restaurant. It has been a big challenge, because everything there is a challenge. We had to start from scratch with everything, such as getting great ingredients and wine and training staff. Ingredients are difficult to find, but we have a really good network of suppliers. Of course, in China, we have to compare ourselves with what's comparable. We cannot compare the restaurant there to our New York restaurants. But compared to what is being done there in Beijing and China, I think we're going to really raise the bar. They are excited, and I'm excited to make a difference there and bring something I will be proud of.

Although you're always looking ahead, do you take the time to step back and enjoy your accomplishments?

The biggest problem in this business is that you can't take anything for granted. You know you're good, but you can't let go. I feel like it's my duty and my job to take care of my customers. It doesn't matter how many restaurants I have. I want to make sure that the customers feel that they have access to me, even if they don't see me. So we really, really care on a day-to-day basis about the well being of the customers, because at the end of the day, it doesn't matter what you have or what you do – it is the customer; it's all about the customer. I think this makes me feel good but, at the same time, I know I have to renew my efforts every day. ●

Peekytoe Crab Salad at Daniel