

NEW YORK

A Symbol of Manhattan

An Interview with Alex von Bidder, Co-Owner and Managing Director, The Four Seasons, New York

EDITORS' NOTE In addition to Co-owning New York's Four Seasons, Alex von Bidder is a certified yoga instructor and Coauthor of *The Four Seasons: A History of America's Premier Restaurant*.

COMPANY BRIEF Located off Park Avenue in the Seagram Building in Midtown Manhattan, *The Four Seasons* is one of New York's foremost dining institutions. Designed by legendary architects Ludwig Mies van der Rohe and Philip Johnson, this spacious, modern classic has been redefining American cuisine since 1959.



Alex von Bidder

How has the economy affected your business?

It is very challenging; our sales are off like everyone else's. Massive layoffs in the financial sector affect us. People are more careful about spending. People are determined to get the best value. It's definitely not an easy time.

Many say the Grill Room is where you need to be for that "who's who" lunch, and the Pool Room is where you should be for that "who's who" dinner. Do you see it that way?

I don't define that – the guests define it. It's a very personal decision. For most people, an expensive restaurant meal serves a purpose beyond just nourishment. The Grill Room power lunch is for those who want to be seen and want to be with others of that same level. The Pool Room has a clientele of people who know exactly what they want in terms of space, culture, and quality, and where the hobnobbing from table to table would be a distraction rather than an enhancement.

You've got a prime location and a prime product. Is it challenging to adapt in today's economy?

It is, because you have fixed costs. Rent is fixed. Staffing is even fixed, because the longer employees are here, the more they're adding value. They know the clients and relate to them on a daily basis, which is the backbone for return clientele. It's not like manufacturing where you can lay off 10 percent of your workforce. This is a very personal business.

Is it hard to communicate the realities of the business to employees?

It's about managing expectations, and one



way to do that is to be absolutely truthful. The great fallacy in our society is that people believe everything only goes up. Every 10 or 12 years, we hit

the downturn, and everybody acts like it's the end of the world. It's not the end of the world; it's a downturn. The government still hasn't admitted that we're in a recession. I hardly care about the definition; all I know is stuff costs more, and there are fewer customers.

How important is it to not only be thought of as a restaurant, but also as a place where community and business leaders are excited to be and build long-standing relationships?

It's the whole basis of being in our business. There are restaurants that cater to transients, and that's even more challenging. It's much nicer when you can take care of people you see year in and year out. We just arranged the 40th birthday for a young man whose Bar Mitzvah we hosted years ago. We also catered his engagement, his sister's wedding, and his parent's anniversary. When you work with the same individuals all the time, you don't have to reinvent the wheel. They know you, they trust you, they know what they want, you put it together, and you charge them a fair amount of money – it's a no-brainer. Why wouldn't I want to be part of this community?

Why has your relationship with Co-Owner Julian Niccolini worked well, and did you know it would from the start?

We're an arranged marriage, so we didn't know from the start. But what we did know is that we each have different interests and different skills, and what I do he doesn't want to do, what he does, I don't do as well as he does. So it's a balance. I look at it like a car battery – you need two poles to make a spark; otherwise the engine doesn't run. It's great to still have this spark after 32 years.

Is it challenging to maintain a work/life balance, and do you find time to turn it off and recharge?

I don't believe in work/life balance. When you like what you do, you do it until you're exhausted, and then you recharge. It's a question of how you recharge. I go on the sailboat, I go in the woods, or I teach yoga – that's my recharging. Everyone has different passions – the key is to make room and time for them, and it doesn't require that much time.

Looking back, could you have imagined being here this long, and what makes you want to stay?

In the early years, it's about earning money, learning, and building a foundation. I don't think that in your 20s – or even in your 30s – you think of staying at a place for a long time. I certainly didn't. Then you get to a certain stage, where the kids are gone and the mortgage is paid off, and it becomes more a question of what else you might want to do. This business is incredibly varied in its demands, and it starts anew every day. It's unique in that you never know who is going to walk in the door; you deal with employees on every conceivable educational level and in every nationality and age group; and you experience everything from landlord issues to food and wine purchasing to throwing and attending parties. Every day it's something else, and that's a lot of fun – particularly with our clientele – and a great reason to get up and come to work. And how many people can say that the end result of their efforts is "delicious."

Do you ever imagine what you'd do if you weren't in this business?

Sure, it's just a question of venue. I assist people in becoming successful. If I produce the best possible party for you, it makes you shine, it makes you succeed. If you come here to have a wonderful meal, I help you do that. When I help somebody achieve something they want, that's where I get my juice. The restaurant is a very easy venue for that. ●

The Pool Room at the Four Seasons restaurant