

Interview

Consistency at the Highest Level

An Interview with Julian Niccolini,
Managing Partner, The Four Seasons Restaurant



Julian Niccolini

EDITORS' NOTE *Julian Niccolini, a native of Tuscany, studied hospitality in Rome and apprenticed in Monaco's Hotel de Paris. He arrived in New York in 1975 and worked at New York City's Palace restaurant before being recruited to manage the Four Seasons Restaurants' Grill Room. In 1995, Niccolini and business partner Alex von Bidder purchased the restaurant. Niccolini recently appeared in the Spike Lee film, Inside Man, is regularly quoted on "Page Six," and has been profiled in GQ, The New York Times, and The New York Post. He pens etiquette columns for both Details and Gotham magazines. He is also the host of some of the most prestigious wine-maker dinners in the U.S. and is considered one of the most influential tastemakers in the world.*

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

New York has been hit hard by the economic recession, but you have a very loyal clientele. How much of an impact have you seen on the business?

In January, February, and March, people became less willing to spend as much money as they had spent in past years. But by the end of March and the very beginning of April, people

began to spend money again because they realized that the only way to be in business is to be able to entertain. So people have come to realize that the future is about the present – it's not really the future. The future is right now. So you have to break bread with your clients, and you have to do what you have to do.

For you, there is a certain level of service, quality, and consistency at the restaurant. During a recession, are you able to adjust in any way with regard to cost?

We're not an airline, where they can just remove the first class seating and provide more economy seating in a downturn. If we do that, we'll be out of business – it's common sense. We have to keep up the Four Seasons name, we have to keep up the Four Seasons quality, we have to keep up the Four Seasons service – that's all we can do. People have to realize that, number one, we don't live forever; number two, you have to enjoy life as much as you can; and number three, you have to entertain and really live life. There are enough people in New York City who can afford to live life like that. Even in the early '70s, when things were really bad, there were a tremendous number of restaurants that were doing well, because we were providing something people really wanted to have, and that's exactly what's happening now. I know that everybody is trying to make us feel guilty because of our success, but success is a good thing. This is about America.

With regard to the 50-year anniversary, did you know when you started out that this restaurant concept was going to work? Has it been what you expected?

When I first started working here, I never thought I would last more than a month because the previous owners were so difficult. But I'm glad that I worked for them because they gave me a tremendous view of the business in general, and I wish that I could be more like them. But the reason I'm here is that the first time I walked into the Four Seasons restaurant, I was totally stunned by the beauty and the architecture of it. I do not believe there has ever been another restaurant built in the same fashion or style as the Four Seasons restaurant in New York City. This restaurant can last forever.

During lunchtime, your rooms do have a reputation, the Grill Room being the spot for the captains of business and those who want to be seen, and the Pool Room being a quieter spot.

It's true. We have the Pool Room and the Grill Room, but it's exactly the same food and the same service, and it's really just a matter of preference. The Grill Room, however, is still the place where the top business leaders have lunch – it was like that 25 years ago and it's like that today. It's an attraction, but the attraction is only because of the fact that we take care of them. And it doesn't really matter what the cost is either because we take care of our customers. This is consistency at the highest level. Alex and I have been here for more than 30 years. How many restaurateurs in America have been taking care of their customers for that long? That's what it's all about. It's very important to understand that, for any restaurant, it's about the service, the food, the ambiance, and so on. It's a matter of continuity, which comes when people walk up the steps and see someone that has been there for a long time.

There are many partnerships that take place but not many that last as long as yours has with Alex.

Of course not, but Alex is a nice man and a tremendous partner – there is no question about it. He understands business better than I do, but we each bring something to the table, and we never disagree.

In addition to the Grill Room and Pool Room, do you also offer space when it comes to private events, for everything from the intimate to high-end affairs?

Of course. We are the quintessential New York City restaurant. There will never be anything like this ever again. We are not the 21 Club, but if you like architecture and space, and if you like to be comfortable with yourself and don't like other people to listen to your conversation, this is the place to be.

This seems to be a business that would be very hard to turn off when you want to. Is it hard to get away from the business, and do you have the ability to maintain a work/life balance?

I've been here since I was 23 years old, and now I'm 55. It's a long time, but I totally enjoy myself, and I don't think I could do anything else. Overall, it has been a good life and a lot of fun. We are entertaining and bringing joy to many people with tremendous events, and it's really nice to come to a place where every day there is some excitement – over food, over wine, or over people wanting to do business here. ●