

How To Make a Difference

Maintaining a Reputation

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

EDITORS' NOTE A native of Tuscany, Julian Niccolini 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. Niccolini and business partner Alex von Bidder purchased the restaurant in 1995. Niccolini appeared in the Spike Lee film, *Inside Man*, 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 considered one of the most influential tastemakers in the world.



Julian Niccolini

RESTAURANT BRIEF *The Four Seasons* (www.fourseasonsrestaurant.com), situated just off Park Avenue in the Seagram Building in Midtown Manhattan, is one of New York's foremost dining establishments. Designed by legendary architects Ludwig Mies van der Rohe and Philip Johnson, the space is modern and classic, and has been redefining American cuisine since 1959.

For a restaurant and a brand that has strong customer loyalty, have you seen an impact on the business during the economic downturn?

In 2008, we still made money, but in 2009, we couldn't make any money because people were tightening their belts. In the first quarter of 2010, our cover count was up 10 percent, which is a very good indication of a recovery. It means people are spending money, but at the same time, people with money are very reluctant to show it off, because there is a tremendous hardship around the world, especially in New York State and New York City. But at the same time, there are people with a tremendous amount of money available at their disposal, and the only way we can all benefit from it is if they're going to spend it. So I don't think people should criticize a banking company or a financial company for spending money in a restaurant because it's called The Four Seasons or 21 Club – they should encourage that, because it is beneficial to all of us, from the waiter, to the busboy, to the chef.

When people don't spend, those who suffer are the waiters and busboys – those who drive the economy.

Exactly. The only way to create new jobs and to create more business in New York City is to encourage people to go out, to spend money, and to enjoy themselves. After all, you only live once. New York City is still the financial capital of the world. The financial companies have taken a tremendous hit as far as their reputations are concerned, because everybody is

after them. But those firms are creating jobs for our economy, especially in New York City. So if we're telling the world they are such terrible human beings, what are we here for? What are we going to do next year? We need to be much nicer to our financial services companies.

You have a very loyal clientele who expects a certain type of service. How are you able to keep the service level so high?

We kept the same quality and number of staff, as well as the same food, so we lowered our profit. It's as simple as that. So instead of making a little bit of money, we're making no money. But we hope things are going to get better.

If we were to slash the quality according to the number of people coming to The Four Seasons, then we might last three or four months, but then we would be out of business as our reputation would be gone. The most important thing is to maintain your reputation, but that is based upon the service and quality of food you're providing, and on taking care of the restaurant itself.

You are also very engaged with the community, and work with a number of charitable organizations on their events.

Every time we do a private event for a charitable organization, instead of charging the same amount of money as we would for those who are not in the charitable business, we give them highly discounted prices. This is great because it brings people into the restaurant who may never have seen it otherwise. So we help put everything together for the benefit of the charitable organization and it also benefits The Four Seasons.

Will you give a brief overview of the extent of offerings you have for private events?

The Four Seasons is a big operation, but it is also a small operation. It's big because we have two restaurants: the Pool Room and the Grill room, plus we have three small private dining rooms where you can host dinner from nine to 110 people, so we're very flexible. At the same time, whether it's a nine-person or a 100-person event, we treat everyone exactly the same because we don't hire anybody from the outside; we have our own staff and it's always the same kitchen. In addition, for most of our better customers, if they have at least 150 people for a dinner or lunch, we're able to close the restaurant for them, and it becomes a spectacular location.

The Four Seasons has been here since 1959, so it is truly part of New York City. I don't believe there is another restaurant in New York City that has lasted this long and kept up the same quality we have. It would be nice for more people in New York City to enjoy The Four Seasons. It's quite remarkable to have lunch or dinner here and recognize that it has been around for 50 years. So we're something very special that belongs in the community of New York City but that also belongs in people's hearts.

During this recession, there is a negative perception about spending money, so how do you convey that the experience at The Four Seasons is one of real value?

It doesn't matter when you come to The Four Seasons, for lunch or dinner; you're going to get value because you get the value of the real estate, of the food, and of the service. But overall, you're going out to have lunch and dinner with your clients – that is part of our culture. I understand there are a lot of people who like to save money by going to much less expensive restaurants, which is fine. But they're not going to get the same deal. There are some restaurants where you will spend much more money than at The Four Seasons and not get the same satisfaction. The Four Seasons has been expensive from the beginning, but now, we're much like everybody else. There are a lot of restaurants more expensive than ours, and there are a lot of restaurants that think they are less expensive, but are actually more expensive. We are delivering a tremendous product, and I hope that people are able to see it. It shouldn't be thought of as what you spend – it's an experience. ●