

Supporting the Community

**An Interview with Alex von Bidder,
Managing Partner, 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 Co-Author of The Four Seasons: A History of America's Premier Restaurant and most recently, Wiggins Learns His Manners at the Four Seasons Restaurant; a best-selling children's book.*

RESTAURANT BRIEF *Four Seasons (www.fourseasonsrestaurant.com) is one of New York's foremost dining establishments, situated just off Park Avenue in the Seagram Building in Midtown Manhattan. 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.*



Alex von Bidder

When you look at business for Four Seasons where you have such a loyal clientele, how much of an impact did you see as a result of the economic crisis?

It has been the biggest impact we've ever experienced in our 51 years. The major impact was that most of our banking and financial clients could no longer celebrate by having closing dinners, mostly because there were no closings, but also because it didn't feel right to anyone for them to have a celebration of any kind. And that is not good for us.

Individual business was down for a while too, but it's coming back. People are comfortable celebrating their lives again – celebrating those milestones of one's life that should not be solely dependent on the economic condition.

During those times, how critical was it to communicate with your people about the long-term focus of this institution and that, while you were going to have to adapt to the times, service and quality could not suffer?

There was an internal decision that we would not change the quality of our service, our food, or our offerings in any way, shape, or form. In order to not cut corners, one needs financial stability, and we're lucky to have that. Just like we don't think this is the end of the world, we didn't think that the profits from three to five years ago were "normal," so we put them aside to weather the storm.

In terms of our longevity, we had a great opportunity last year, in probably the worst year of our lives, to celebrate our 50-year anniversary. We chose to go ahead with those celebrations and had a wonderful party for our best customers – about 1,200 of them showed up one night.

CNBC celebrated our anniversary with a 45-minute documentary that is still available on our Web site and Hulu.com. It focused on the long term, as we are.

The lack of corporate parties also gave us an opportunity to help some not-for-profit organizations that depend on our support, and that also had a bad year. We made a conscious decision that we would not abandon those organizations, like Meals on Wheels, the James Beard Foundation, the Black Alumni of Pratt Institute, and several others that we underwrite or with which we participate in fundraisers.

The culture of this establishment seems rooted in its role in the community; you do a tremendous amount with not-for-profits and those in need. Do you see that as a responsibility of leaders today, and how critical is that to the culture?

It is of utmost importance, because if you want somebody to be interested in you and support you, the first step is to support them. We've always chosen to help hunger organizations, like God's Love We Deliver. We assist people who cannot afford to come here.

When you have clients who come to the restaurant several times a week, how are you able to remain innovative after 50 years?

We're staying the course while changing every day, and that is the hallmark of any company that deals with their clientele as regularly as we do.

It's fine for somebody to have the same meal every day if they choose to, but personally, that would bore me and it would bore our chefs, so to change menus is good for us and it's good for everyone who buys a meal.

You're known for hosting private events and a number of banquets, but you have an ability to cater to different event needs in the Pool Room, for instance. Is that well understood in the marketplace, and how critical is the private event part of the business?

That business is between 20 and 30 percent of our revenue, so it's certainly not the most important. We are very lucky with our architecture that offers a neutral background against which you can do all kinds of things – product launches, client appreciation events, weddings and bar mitzvahs, and all kinds of events for the family or for the corporation.

Even our private party business is a very loyal business. We just celebrated a 60th birthday party for a client who had his 16th birthday here, whose parents had their anniversary here, and whose mother had a significant birthday here. It's good to be that family's place for celebrations.

Many people have talked about how the dynamic between you and Julian (Niccolini, Co-Owner) works. Is it challenging when you've been together so long, and how do you continue to make it work?

It is about giving each other enough space and to know that when you spend a good chunk of time with each other every day, you don't have to discuss every detail; you have to agree on the principles of how to run the business, and each contributes to the organization what he's good at and the other tries to stay out to a degree.

Relationships fall apart when you're either too close or too far apart. And we cover for each other when one of us is not here and we complement each other in terms of talents and interests when we're both here.

How important has it been to cultivate the next generation of leaders?

We are only as good as our department heads and the next generation, and you never know what happens until the succession is required. A lot of CEOs fool themselves when they're looking for their successor, because they're looking for a carbon copy of themselves – that does not exist and does not work.

I subscribe to the notion that when you create a vacuum, somebody will fill the vacuum. You don't know until it's actually all clear.

How do you define what makes a successful and effective leader?

The most crucial element of leadership is to make decisions that are good for the whole company.

The minute you make egotistical decisions for next quarter's earnings or for one's own retirement plan exclusively, you shortchange the operation and the company. ●