

# NYC

## A New York Institution

**An Interview with Julian Niccolini,  
Co-Owner, Four Seasons Restaurant**



**EDITORS' NOTE** *Julian Niccolini, a native of Tuscany, studied hospitality in Rome and apprenticed in Monaco's Hôtel 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 winemaker dinners in the U.S. and is considered one of the most influential tastemakers in the world.*

**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.*

**Four Seasons Restaurant has been an institution for 52 years in New York. What has made this place so strong and how has it continued to grow year after year?**

Whether we like it or not, it's special because of the architecture of the building. The building itself is designed by one of the most incredible architects of our time, Mies van der Rohe. The restaurant was designed by Philip Johnson.

I found an article written in 1959 about this place with the headline, "The Most Expensive Restaurant Ever Built", and it described in minute detail the architect, the lighting, flower designers, and so on. So that was the best of the best at that time.

They designed the restaurant in 1959 at the cost of \$5 million and kept up things on a daily basis, and that's what we have continued to do. You have to spend money on upkeep, but people that come here never believe this restaurant is 50 years old because of how it has been maintained and because the design is incredible.

It's also because we can constantly keep up with the so-called food revolution. In 1959, even though it was still called American, it was influenced by French cuisine and there were a lot of French dishes on the menu. Slowly, it has developed into a 100 percent American restaurant, concentrating on the freshest organic food that is healthy.

There are so many people here that have been coming for so many years. I have been here for over 30 years and these people have never gained any weight.

So we keep up with our time and our cuisine is as good as any other restaurant, because simplicity is the most important thing in life.

**Is it tough to balance being innovative with keeping those customers who want the basics happy?**

You have to have both.

We are lucky because as our name suggests, we change the menu on a seasonal basis so we can constantly reinvent ourselves. The kitchen and front of house get rejuvenated and because of that, we can be creative.

We have people who have been coming here for a long time so some have their own favorite dishes that never change.

Because our food is so simple and good, and prepared in a fashion where we consider your health, many are willing to try whatever we make on a daily basis. We absolutely limit things that are not good for you.

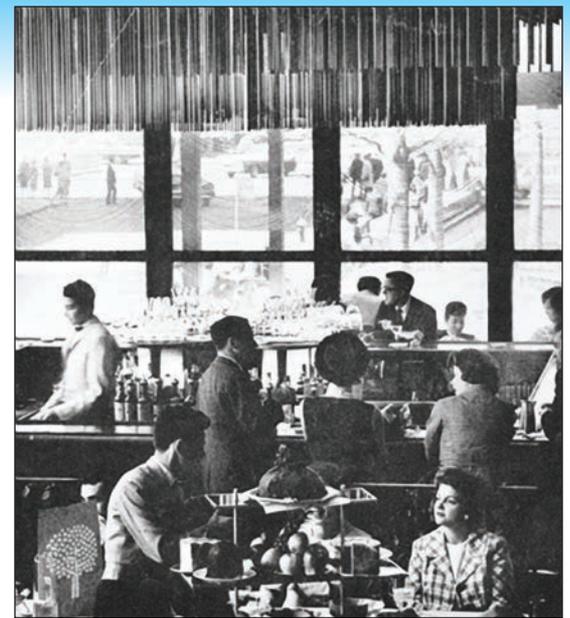
**Does this restaurant get enough credit for how great the food is? People talk so much about the atmosphere.**

The restaurant should be the total experience – people should not just go to a restaurant because of the food; people should go because of the food, the service, and the setting.

It's important that when you come to a restaurant you are greeted properly, whether or not you are famous. Many writers have said the Four Seasons Restaurant is one of the most democratic restaurants in the country because we treat everybody in the same fashion. Everybody gets exactly the same wonderfully prepared food and the same treatment – we do not discriminate.

**How important are the private functions and the private space?**

Our private event spaces are beautiful. They were put together in 1959 but they are



as beautiful today as when we first opened the restaurant and we are able to accommodate anywhere from 10 to 110 people in the private dining rooms.

A lot of people want the whole restaurant for a private event or wedding, and since we have so much space available, we can do that.

We're also on 52nd Street and Park Avenue, which is a central location.

In addition, we serve the same food to a private event – we don't hire anyone from outside. The kitchen will prepare the food to the same specifications as our menu.

**Many talk about how the Grill Room is for lunch and the Pool Room is for dinner. Is that how you define it?**

No. The Grill Room has a different look and feel than the Pool Room and one of the main reasons is because as soon as you come up the steps, you see the Grill Room first.

But the Pool Room is probably one of the most beautiful rooms in the city of New York and there are a lot of people that would rather be there than in the Grill Room for lunch.

In the Grill Room, we have 22 tables; in the Pool Room, we have 38 tables.

But you have more privacy if you eat in the Pool versus the Grill. Unfortunately, we have led people to believe the Grill is better than the Pool but it's not true. The Pool is more desirable for conducting business and if you like to see and be seen, the Grill is the best avenue for you.

For someone who has never been here before, my suggestion is to have lunch in the Pool and have dinner in the Pool and, one day, come back and have lunch in the Grill.

**Do you ever take the time to appreciate what you've been able to accomplish with Four Seasons and how it has become an institution?**

Yes, but we all have to realize that whether this is an institution or not, every day is a new day. People come here to spend their hard-earned money and we have to deliver on their expectations. It doesn't matter if you're a regular customer or not – you need to get 100 percent satisfaction. ●

*Alex von Bidder (left) and Julian Niccolini (right) in the Pool Room (top left photo); vintage photo of the Grill Room (right)*