



Julian Niccolini (right) with partner Alex von Bidder

EDITORS' NOTE Julian Niccolini studied hospitality in Rome and apprenticed in Monaco's *Hôtel de Paris*. In 1975, he arrived in New York and worked at New York City's *Palace* restaurant before being recruited to manage the *Four Seasons* restaurant's Grill Room. In 1995, Niccolini and business partner Alex von Bidder purchased the restaurant. Niccolini 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 Situated just off Park Avenue in the Seagram Building in Midtown Manhattan, *Four Seasons* (www.fourseasonsrestaurant.com) 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.

Many business leaders talk about the resiliency of New York. How is the city faring today and how is your business doing?

Business is getting better all the time. There is tremendous resiliency in New York City because whether we like it or not, New York City is still the capital of the world.

But it's gotten to be a much better place to live since the Guilani and Bloomberg Administrations have been working on improving the city. This is a place where people can walk the streets at night and not worry about things. The quality of life in New York City is getting better so people feel more comfortable buying apartments, spending money in restaurants, and going out and enjoying life.

A People Business

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

Over the past year or so, we've seen a tremendous number of people moving into New York City – more than ever before. This is a good sign for the restaurant industry and the real estate market.

How do you keep a restaurant like this so popular for so long?

There are many great restaurants in New York City. Everybody wants to open a restaurant, but they don't take into consideration why they're opening the restaurant in the first place. Only professional people should open a restaurant – not people that like to open a restaurant because they want their name on it or to gather their friends there.

So people go from Restaurant A to B and so on, and six months later, Restaurant A is not hot like it was six months ago, so they go onto the next one. Then people lose their jobs and it's sad.

We try to do our best because we care about our customers, about food, and about service, and we're constantly trying to renew ourselves.

This is a landmark building and restaurant; there are no other restaurants in New York City like this, and the restaurant experience is supposed to be enjoyed not just for the food and service, but as a whole picture.

How do you create a balance in offering your clientele what they like but also continue to be innovative?

Number one, you have to be considerate of clientele that you have known for many years, because the whole staff knows what they like and don't like. For the new clientele that we're constantly trying to bring in, we have to make them believe that this restaurant is as new today as it was in 1959. The goals we had when we opened in 1959 are the same goals anybody should have in trying to open the same *Four Seasons* restaurant today: freshness, food that is seasonal, very fine service, very fine linen, very fine surroundings – this is what it takes.

Because you and Alex are so visible, are you more focused on service?

Your first contact with the restaurant upon arrival is the person who is greeting you and he is truly there to welcome you, whether you're a regular or not.

When people go to a restaurant, they're not going to go out to criticize the restaurant; they want to enjoy themselves and spend money. They come to the *Four Seasons* because they want to be entertained and this is what it's all about.

So we always try to change the food, change the menu, and change the wine, so that everybody gets excited more so here than anywhere else.



Four Seasons Bar

How much of the restaurant's success is the building's "wow" factor?

This is one of the best buildings in New York City – no question. It's a Mies van der Rohe building and one of the most beautiful buildings in many respects, and there is so much space available.

The restaurant itself was designed by Philip Johnson and I would say this is the best interior design that he has ever done, especially considering that this restaurant has been greeting people since 1959.

You have people coming from around the world looking at the building and the restaurant, and a lot of them are surprised when you tell them that it was opened in 1959 and you have the same chair, the same hall, the same bar stool, etc.

With your success, are there opportunities to expand?

Yes. We are exploring those possibilities and hope it will happen soon because it would be wonderful to do something like this in some other parts of the world.

How do you keep the restaurant from being intimidating to some?

The problem with the *Four Seasons* is when you walk up the steps, you feel intimidated. But even that has been overcome, because while in other venues, you may have had a maître d' or manager who was intimidating, we are the opposite. It doesn't matter if you're the President of the United States or an individual who comes from down the street because there is no difference in the way we treat our guests.

You offer great food, but how healthy is it?

I eat here every day. We try to limit butter and we don't use any cream. The taste has to be fresh from the product itself – we don't want to mask anything. Some people like to use a lot of butter or cream, but at day's end, you will feel pretty miserable after eating that way.

What do you hope people will say about this restaurant?

They can say what they like; we just care that they come back.

With all you have witnessed over the years, have you considered writing a book?

Yes, but it would have to be entertaining. Everything you do in life should be fun – otherwise, do something else. This restaurant is a people business so you have to be entertaining, and I hope everyone will have fun and come back. ●