

Hospitality

Standing the Test of Time



**An Interview with Drew Nieporent,
Founder and President, Myriad Restaurant Group**

Drew Nieporent (left); Tribeca Grill (above)

EDITORS' NOTE Drew Nieporent is a New York City restaurateur. Nieporent graduated in 1977 from Cornell University with a degree from the School of Hotel Management. He began his career at New York's Maxwell's Plum and Tavern on the Green. Nieporent opened his first restaurant, Montrachet, in 1985 and teamed with actor Robert De Niro to open Tribeca Grill in 1990.

COMPANY BRIEF Myriad Restaurant Group (www.myriadrestaurantgroup.com) owns and operates numerous restaurants, many of which are known for their celebrity clientele and difficulty in obtaining reservations. The company owns and manages such nightspots as Corton, Nobu, and Tribeca Grill, as well as an outpost of Nobu in London. They also offer hospitality consulting services, including development, strategy, and training services.

What was your vision in starting Myriad Restaurant Group?

I always had the vision to create more than one venue. The template was based on Joseph Baum and Restaurant Associates in the '60s who developed different restaurants in New York.

What I didn't understand at the time was the economics of doing that and how to afford to create businesses like that. I've always looked at the process in a similar way to making movies. It's not easy to make a movie either – you need a script and a director, and to handle all the technical aspects, as well as the right actors. But the one thing you don't think about is how much money it will take.

So I was a visionary without the financial resources, but it was always something I wanted to do.

The one thing I didn't want to do was to create the same thing over and over again; I wanted to make different movies.

As you expanded, was it important there be a common thread throughout all the venues or did you look at each as an individual offering?

I have always looked at everything the way you look at your children: they have your genes but they're all individuals and you have to dress them differently. So if there are any shared synergies, it's in the people that are going to collaborate to implement the idea.

Even in terms of design and architecture, I rarely used the same person except that David Rockwell and I did collaborate on a number of things early on in his career.

But the only thing that is systematic or shared in terms of these restaurants are the people in the Myriad Restaurant Group who helped us actualize the vision.

How many Nobu restaurants do you intend to develop?

I don't even think Robert De Niro's aspiration or mine for that matter had to do with how many we could put out. The interesting thing is that there continues to be such an overwhelming demand for what Nobu provides that it sometimes seems inexhaustible in that it can fit almost anywhere.

When we opened 18 years ago, going out to Japanese restaurants wasn't necessarily the trendy thing to do. So we created the interest and demand, and we have sustained that.

With a selection of well-known restaurants, is it challenging to avoid losing that focus on innovation?

You evolve from a philosophy of "if it ain't broke, don't fix it" to understanding that dining, especially in the city of New York, somehow becomes generational. It's inescapable that I'm more than 20 years past the first restaurant that I opened so there is a whole generation of restaurant-goers that were children whose parents may never have taken them to my earliest restaurants. So the change in innovation comes with understanding that the current restaurant-goers are driving the marketplace and that you have to create something that appeals to them.

You also place a major focus on wine service. Was this part of the business always of interest to you?

My contribution to the dining culture in America has been to knock away the pretensions of dining. Part of that has to do with wine, because it's an intimidating part of the experience.

I wanted to make it more accessible, and at my first restaurant, Montrachet, we offered incredible Burgundies at a favorable

price. We took the same ideas to Tribeca Grill, which also earned a Grand Award from *Wine Spectator* – one of only 80 in the world. We then went to Rubicon in San Francisco and collaborated with Francis Ford Coppola and Larry Stone to create another unique wine program there. I then opened my wine store, Crush, on 57th Street. In each case, we've tried to present the wine in such a way that it's easier to understand and not as intimidating from a price standpoint. Especially in the wine store, we offer not only the opportunity for consumers to buy great wine but also to learn more about wine as they buy.

You are focused on providing a comfortable hospitality experience. Is it sometimes difficult to create that comfort when there is such a demand to get into your restaurants?

It might be tough to get in, but once you're in, you're well taken care of.

The most gratifying fact about my career is that the restaurants we've created have stood the test of time. Tribeca has been around for 22-plus years; Nobu for 18-plus years; and Montrachet ran for 22-plus years and Rubicon for 14. Some of our other efforts also had fairly long runs.

How critical is it to retain talent in a business that typically has high turnover and how much do you invest in training your people?

Two of my partners have been with me from the beginning and we have quite a number of original staff at all of the restaurants. It's as simple as this: treating people how you want to be treated is the prescription for holding onto your staff. We offer growth opportunities to all of the people who started with us. In many cases, dozens of staff members – some former coat check girls – are involved in upper management of the Nobu restaurants, which means that we aren't shortsighted; we offer opportunities to the people who are looking forward to staying with us.

Did you have that entrepreneurial spirit early on?

Yes. The only thing that limits me today is the financial circumstances – rents, wages, and food costs are high and there is a lot of competition. So none of that makes a great recipe for capitalism, but I approach my restaurants with the thought that if we do a good job, people will come and the restaurant will make money. ●