



Boulud the Builder

An Interview with Daniel Boulud,
Chef and Owner, The Dinex Group



EDITORS' NOTE A native of Lyon, France, Chef- and Restaurateur Daniel Boulud has won countless awards and is now considered one of America's leading culinary authorities. He is best known as Chef/Owner of his signature restaurant DANIEL on Manhattan's Upper East Side, where he has now lived for more than 25 years. Named Outstanding Restaurateur of the Year by the James Beard Foundation, Boulud established his reputation at Le Cirque where he charmed the city's who's who from 1987 to 1993 with his refined yet soulful cooking.

COMPANY BRIEF The Dinex Group (www.danielboulud.com) owns and operates 14 properties by Daniel Boulud with seven in New York— DANIEL, a Relais & Châteaux member; Bar Boulud; Boulud Sud; Épicerie Boulud; Café Boulud; DB Bistro Moderne; and DBGB Kitchen and Bar. Boulud has extended his culinary reach with Café Boulud in Palm Beach and Toronto, DB Bistro Moderne in Miami and Singapore, Maison Boulud in Montreal and Beijing, and a Bar Boulud in London.

Are there specific characteristics that link all of your venues or are the brands within the group viewed separately?

We have different offerings and price tiers. The location has a lot to do with the direction of the clientele. One characteristic is impeccable ingredients; we try to have high consistency with not just our food but with our relationship to our suppliers and with our customers through our service. Also, we seek to maintain spontaneity and creativity by giving the chef in each restaurant the freedom to create, which is in line with the core of the Dinex brand.

So each restaurant is unique, but very closely monitored by our management team.

With that diversity in your restaurants, how do you maintain consistency?

At DBGB, we want the waiter to be in blue jeans and we want the food to be casual, but the ingredients themselves, the intensity of work in the preparation, and the personalization of the food is important to us.

I work closely with the corporate chef and on our standards for service. We have both a Director of Operation and a Director of Service, and we work closely with the general managers to make certain our standards are maintained on a daily basis. A restaurant is a living entity and you build it to last but it must always be watched closely.

How important is it to continue to innovate in terms of menu selection?

We want to make sure that customers experience consistency so they can continue to be attracted by dishes that they want to come back to enjoy. For example, at DB Bistro, we like to do an Orecchiette pasta paired with a changing meat, so sometimes rabbit or venison, or beef, veal or lamb and sometimes baby goat. We work on having spontaneity within the preparation.



Daniel Boulud; the interior of DANIEL (upper right); entrance on Manhattan's 65th Street (above)

Is there still room for growth within the New York market?

Yes. Épicerie Boulud, which is an eat-in or take-home style of business, has room to grow, but in terms of restaurants, I'm very happy with what I now have, from the three-star DANIEL to DBGB and Épicerie Boulud. I have scaled down in terms of price and style offering. It is a great spectrum for the people who want to enjoy a Daniel Boulud product but can't afford to come to DANIEL and also works for those who come to DANIEL but sometimes want a more casual meal.

How do you define what makes a truly great chef?

It's all about the food. Some chefs never try to reach the top – they enjoy being somewhere in the middle where they can be very popular and successful, but more mainstream and geared toward being commercial as opposed to exceptional.

Those chefs are smart and they certainly have less stress in producing what they do versus chefs of my caliber, who are very involved at the top of the game. I'm always concerned with every one of my businesses, especially with my home base.

As your business has grown, has it become more challenging to remain involved in every aspect of it?

No. Our management company, The Dinex Group, gets daily reports from each chef and the manager about how they did, who they served, and new dishes on the menu. We also have a weekly conference call with all of the top managers, the sommeliers, the directors of service, the maître d's, the general managers, the chefs, the sous chefs, the pastry chefs – everybody is around the table.

For our restaurants outside of New York, management is in constant communication with them. We have video conference meetings with London, Singapore, Beijing, Toronto, and Montreal where we talk about all of the details.

Would it make a difference if I was dipping my spoon into every pot of every restaurant to know if the sauce is right? I doubt it. We pay our staff very well and give them the responsibility to carry our brand. If they aren't good enough and have trouble doing that, we replace the chef right away.

Do you ever take a moment to reflect on all you have achieved?

Our 20th anniversary of DANIEL is a way of contemplating the wonderful achievements. What makes me the most excited is to see the people who have worked with us over the past 20 years and how well they have done, and how much they continue to be motivated and inspired.

The teams at all of my restaurants have a real fidelity and commitment; they care about me, about our business, and about the staff that works for them – that is rewarding to me.

At a time when so many people are focused on nutrition, can you offer great food yet make it healthy?

Ours is not old-fashioned French food. Today, there's a big trend to use vegetables and fruits, but I have been using vegetables for the past 30 years en masse.

We have vegetarians who come to DANIEL and don't know what to order, and we present them an entire eight-course menu where any vegetarian will find paradise – the food is all light and made with no dairy. So providing healthy food is very important, but at the same time, it has to be tasty.

It's important for me to make healthy food, but also ambitious food, which takes talent. ●