



Building ESquared

An Interview with Jimmy Haber,
Managing Partner, ESquared Hospitality



Casa Nonna (left); BLT Steak (above);
and BLT Prime (below), all in New York

EDITORS' NOTE Jimmy Haber has been an investor and owner of restaurants and nightclubs in New York City for more than 30 years. With an initial investment in *Le Bilboquet* in the early '80s, Haber began his introduction into the hospitality industry. He next invested in *Metro CC*, *Flowers*, *AZ*, and *Pazo* before teaming up with Laurent Tourondel and Keith Treyball in 2003 to open *BLT Steak New York* and *BLT Fish*. In 2011, Haber and Treyball formed ESquared



Jimmy Haber

Hospitality – the parent company of *BLT Restaurants*, *Casa Nonna*, *The Florentine*, and *GO Burger Bar & Grill*. With more than 25 restaurants, Haber is intimately involved in all details of development, construction, and financing of ESquared Hospitality's establishments. Haber is one of the founding members of the New York City Hospitality Alliance.

COMPANY BRIEF ESquared Hospitality (www.e2hospitality.com) is an international restaurant and hospitality group owned by Jimmy Haber and Keith Treyball. Built on a commitment of "Exceeding Expectations" with extraordinary food and excellent customer service, ESquared Hospitality has grown into a diversified group of restaurant concepts, from the flagship *BLT Steak*, which opened in 2004 to more than 26 restaurants on two continents. ESquared Hospitality properties include the BLT restaurants, comprised of *BLT Steak*, *BLT Burger*, *BLT Fish* and *BLT Fish Shack*, *BLT Prime*, and *BLT Bar & Grill*. In addition, ESquared Hospitality owns and operates *Casa Nonna* and *The Florentine*, as well as *GO Burger Bar & Grill* and the *GO Burger Truck* in New York.

How did BLT and ESquared Hospitality begin?

I had lost \$10 million in the restaurant business before *BLT Steak* was successful. I swore *BLT Steak* would be my last restaurant.

I'm a serial entrepreneur, and when the original *BLT Steak* in New York became successful, it became easy for me to do more deals.

BLT Steak New York started as a failed restaurant of mine called *Pazo*; so we decided to put *BLT Steak* there. We had another failed restaurant called *AZ*, so we put *BLT Fish* there. Then I met another failed restaurant owner

and we did a joint venture with him called *BLT Prime*. He brought me a space from his landlord for D.C. So it has evolved in this fashion.

Then we did our first hotel deal through people we met at the *Ritz-Carlton* in San Juan. We did well there – the *Ritz-Carlton* appreciated us. Then we started seeing other hotels through *Ritz-Carlton* and *Marriott*.

The deals we are doing now are the result of people bringing them to me.

Is there a lot more growth opportunity for the BLT brand?

It's not just BLT, but ESquared.



I have a very powerful brand in *BLT Steak* and *BLT*, and we're going to expand that – we're doing a *BLT Prime* at the *Doral Hotel* with Donald Trump; we're doing a *BLT Steak* in South Korea at a new *J.W. Marriott*; we recently opened up a *BLT Burger* in Taiwan; we have plans for a *BLT Steak* in Las Vegas; we're doing a *BLT Steak* in Bahrain.

So it's an extremely important brand, but it's our ultimate goal to grow other brands with other chefs through ESquared Hospitality.

How will you build awareness for the ESquared brand?

For every one of our restaurants now, I want the logos to include ESquared Hospitality branding, so we embed in the consumer's mind that if it's an ESquared Hospitality restaurant, they can expect – and hopefully receive – a certain level of service and food quality.

Is there a tangible difference between what has now worked and what didn't work before?

Historically, with the ones that didn't work, we made a lot of stupid mistakes early on. It hasn't been any one mistake for us. Sometimes it's tangle, like being in the wrong location.

We need stability in our management, be it a general manager or back-of-the-house leader. This manifests itself in many ways – in food quality, service quality, food costs, labor costs. Once you have stability and people you can rely on, that is half the battle.

We're having a tough time finding the right people in New York because there are so many hotels opening up – hotels now look at food and beverage as a profit center, so there is competition for the limited employee talent pool.

What will ESquared Hospitality mean?

We intend it to mean that when a customer walks in, he or she can expect great service. It won't be perfect. We try to preach to our restaurants that when we make mistakes, we do everything in our power to make it up to the customer.

We look at the online reviews; we demand that our general managers and corporate directors contact customers that are unhappy and have them come back to us.

We understand that a great meal cannot overcome bad service, but great service can overcome a bad meal.

We also want them to know that when they visit us, the quality of the food is going to be the best for the dining level we're operating on.

Behind the scenes, this is a tough business. How do you manage all of your businesses?

I find I need to pay attention to it a lot, so 80 percent of my focus is on the restaurant business. However, I let my people worry about operations and openings of restaurants.

With my other companies, I can have a half-hour conversation once a day, provide input on decisions, and know they will get implemented properly; whereas in the restaurants, it's often up to me to implement things in terms of the financial and strategic areas. ●