

The Essence of a Fine Restaurant

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



The Grill Room and Bar of Four Seasons Restaurant

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 wine-maker dinners in the U.S. and is considered one of the most influential tastemakers in the world.*



Julian Niccolini

RESTAURANT BRIEF *Situated just off Park Avenue in the Seagram Building in Midtown Manhattan, Four Seasons (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 re-defining American cuisine since 1959.*

At 50 years old, what has given this restaurant such staying power?

Most of the people who open a restaurant today, be it a large or small corporation, do so with a limited view of the life-span of two to three years, and that's it.

They don't have the kind of expenses that the Four Seasons has, they don't have health-care or pension funds for their employees, and they don't have a profit-sharing program.

You can call them fly-by-night operations, because that's what they are. They are here to make quick money, and are sometimes very successful – they have a chef, who maybe visits once a year, but people go crazy because the chef is so famous.

People should definitely open new restaurants, but for the long term.

The Four Seasons wrote the book on this 50 years ago. People go to a new restaurant to get something new, but a restaurant is supposed to offer incredible food, setting, and service, and have people remember you and what you like and dislike – this is the essence of a fine restaurant. You cannot have a restaurant like that when it's only two or three years old.

There are very few people in the city of New York that really run great restaurants. I am

totally confident that a restaurant like Four Seasons will survive because the place is beautiful and spectacular, and people go to a restaurant not just for food but the total ambiance.

How does offering healthcare and a pension fund impact your ability to provide that long-term service?

Everybody wants to cut corners today and some of them can do that – we cannot, because we have a union house, and we have health benefits and pensions we have to pay for. If

the Four Seasons didn't have to do all this, we'd easily be successful for the next 20 years.

But people have to be able to take care of themselves. This means we have to charge more for our food, but that's what everyone should do – restaurants should have to take care of their own people.

This focus seems close to your heart. Is that because you believe in providing hospitality with a certain ethos?

We are in the hospitality business. Alex and I are here almost every day. Can you imagine anyone else taking care of a restaurant on a daily basis? Everyone talks about it but they're just telling other people to be hospitable because they're not there.

When the Four Seasons was built, it was a true restaurant concept. It's a place that you can come to for lunch or dinner every day.

Not many people can afford to come every day, but some can. A restaurant is supposed to be a place to meet, break bread, and have lunch or dinner, and it doesn't have to be for a special occasion.

However, we can also act as a special occasion restaurant but not many can afford it. The way it was designed is special.

If you really want to enjoy yourself, choose a venue like ours with a comfortable setting, where the food is fine.

Is it hard to be high-end while making sure the guests feel comfortable?

Many publications have said that the Four Seasons is probably the most democratic restaurant in America. We don't care what your story is. When you come here, you will be treated like everyone else.

When people make a reservation, we try to place them where they want to be no matter who they are.

How do you give clients what they want while keeping it fresh?

Our food is fresh – it's evolving on a daily or weekly basis. We change the menu all the time. This is how we keep our customers after 50 years.

We care that it's hormone-free, grass-fed, etc. The food we're serving to our customers is food we're serving to ourselves. For us to be healthy, we have to be concerned about what we're eating.

Would you touch on the importance of corporate and private events?

We're a large restaurant, and we have the Grill Room and the Pool Room. We also have three private dining rooms that can accommodate anywhere from eight people to 110.

In addition, we do a lot of private events for corporations, weddings, bar mitzvahs, or engagement events.

We have book events and host fashion shows. We have also been able to do all of these things without hiring anyone from outside.

A lot of places often need to be redone. How has this establishment stood the test of time?

In 1959, they spent more than \$5 million to open this restaurant. Can you go to another restaurant in the city of New York that has maintained the quality and standard of Four Seasons? You have to keep it up and you hope the people will understand how the restaurant is supposed to be.

How important is the quality of the building that Four Seasons is located in to your success?

More than ever, a restaurant like the Four Seasons cannot exist in too many places. You have to be in a very special dedicated building that reflects the quality of the architecture of the building itself, and the Four Seasons itself.

If the Four Seasons was to move to another location, which is possible, it would have to be in a building equivalent to the architectural standard of the Four Seasons restaurant.

To open in a new location for a restaurant like this would probably cost \$130 million, and I don't think that people are interested in spending that kind of money unless they have the vision.

You also support New York City.

The Four Seasons restaurant is an integral part of the city of New York. Long ago, this was deemed the quintessential New York City restaurant, and I think it is. ●