

Fireman's Focus

Interview with Sheldon Fireman,
Founder and President, Fireman Hospitality Group

EDITORS' NOTE Sheldon (Shelly) Fireman founded Café Concepts in 1974 with the opening of Café Fiorello at 1900 Broadway – directly across the street from Lincoln Center. The restaurant was an instant success, partly due to its signature thin-crust pizza, which received New York Magazine's accolade "Best Pizza in New York". Fireman has developed an organization of both seasoned and contemporary industry professionals to help execute his vision



Sheldon (Shelly) Fireman

for design, food, and genuine hospitality. Tackling large spaces in high-traffic areas, the company has grown steadily. Concentrating on the cultural centers in New York City, Lincoln Center, Carnegie Hall, and the Theater District, the company opened Trattoria Dell'Arte, the Redeye Grill, Brooklyn Diner across from Carnegie Hall, Bond 45, and Brooklyn Diner in Times Square. In 2010, a second Bond 45 opened, the first Fireman Hospitality Group restaurant out-of-state, in National Harbor on the Potomac in Maryland. A second restaurant, Fiorella Pizzeria, opened there in May 2011. Most recently, Fireman opened Florian, an Italian restaurant in New York City's Gramercy neighborhood.

COMPANY BRIEF Fireman Hospitality Group (thefiremangroup.com) owns and operates a diverse portfolio of fine-dining and casual restaurants in the heart of entertainment centers in New York City and on the Potomac River in National Harbor, Maryland. The group's nine venues include the beloved Café Fiorello, a New York institution since 1974, as well as eateries Trattoria Dell'Arte, Redeye Grill, Brooklyn Diner, Bond 45, Fiorella Italian Kitchen, and the newly unveiled Florian.

What has helped the company remain so relevant?

Hard work, hard work, and more hard work by talented people who execute well and who love this business. They are the types that would be in love with anything they were doing – they're filled with energy and intellectual curiosity that they inherited from their families and have enhanced through their experiences. These are guys who really study and do their homework, and who are intrinsically hospitable and gracious. They are what we find to be our greatest asset.

Is it possible to teach those traits?

I cannot teach them. When I handled the hiring, even for waiters and waitresses, the first question I asked was how their relationship was with their family. If they came from a troubled home, my experience led me to understand that they would have trouble being able to deliver genuine hospitality.

I don't teach hospitality – people are born with it, their parents grow it, and we're blessed to have them with

us. Sometimes, there is a bad apple, but we try to get rid of them as fast as possible.

Is there a common thread that ties your venues together under the Fireman umbrella or is each unique?

They're tied to Fireman because Fireman is tied to their grandparents, their parents, and their upbringing. So the commonality is only an extension of who we are – that's all it is.

People come to our house and we have to give them good food, we have to be hospitable, we have to make them comfortable, and we want them to have a good time – the only reason to entertain people is so they can have a good time.

We do all of this and we never think about profits first – it's always about what we do and how we behave to make a profit for the company. We are extremely profitable, but we never think about money.

People see the excitement of this business from the outside but it's pretty tough, right?

It's not sexy at all. Imagine having to gorge yourself with all kinds of food all day – after a while, you can't stand looking at food. Customers are excited to go out by 8:30 at night because they work in offices and have finished their work, but you've been doing food and hospitality all day, so all you want to do is go home.

The sexiness is for the management in the stores – they get the applause and the recognition from the guests; they get to talk to celebrities and people involved with opera, theatre, and entertainment.

The rest of the staff is drained by the work of ensuring that everyone else is having fun. Then, when we go out to eat or be with people socially, they all want to be critics. We want to talk about sports or art or books, but all they want to talk about is food and what they liked or didn't like at your restaurant.

Is it important to build recognition for Fireman or for each individual brand?

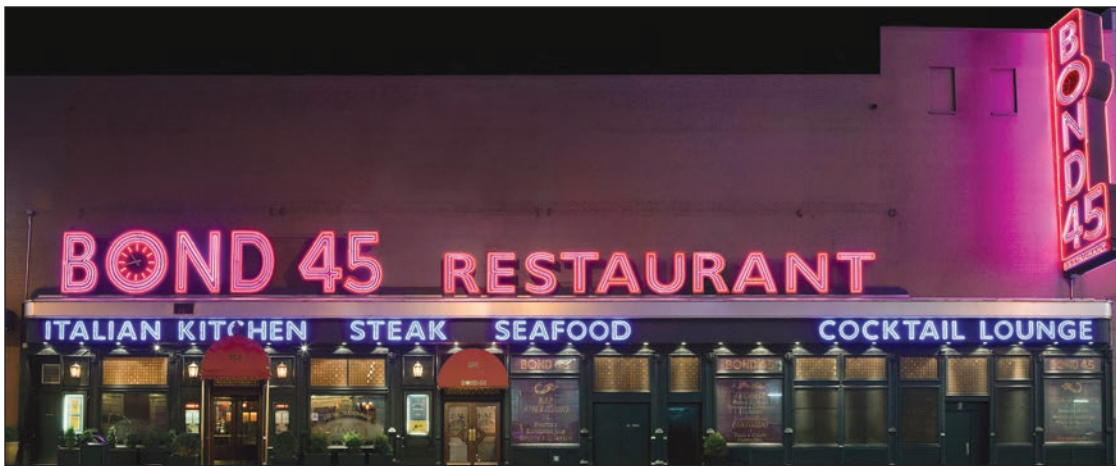
We have various brands that fit in their locations, in their hotels, or on their properties because we cater to many different marketplaces. I want to encourage that individual expression.

How great are the expansion opportunities for you and are they primarily in New York?

New York is very difficult because of the high rents and the giant chains that come in from all over the world willing to eat those high rents and pay those prices because being in New York is good advertising for them. They probably do believe in it, but they are branding it in their own way.

We have a difficult time trying to make the economics work. We have two locations in Washington and we know exactly where we'd like to be up and down the East Coast. We will soon be searching the Washington and Florida markets for expansion. We're always anxious to make deals in New York because it's close to home, but we're looking for sensible deals.





Fireman Hospitality Group's Trattoria Dell'Arte (opposite page); Bond 45 restaurant (above); and Redeye Grill (below)

Would you go into new markets with some of the existing brands?

Within the Brooklyn Diner concept, we already have a USA Brooklyn Clubhouse and we have plans for a Brooklyn Grill. We have a very casual Brooklyn feel. Outside of that, we're only experts on Italian food. I have a home in Italy and have lived there every summer for 25 years. We have more Italian chefs than any other company in the U.S., and we have more Italian-American management than any other company. We know American food and ethnic food, and we want to focus on what we are experts at.

With the focus on eating healthy today, is it difficult to provide the right food to cater to those needs and tastes?

I'm healthy. We've had a vegetable antipasto bar for 25 years. My wife is a vegan and I'm a vegetarian except for the rare times when I have pastrami or smoked salmon. If we can't be healthy with Italian food, we're in big trouble.

We do cater to the health needs of others and we do care. We've been following homeopathy and good health through food for 25-plus years.

How do you focus your time and has that changed over the years?

I used to be more hands-on. At the first restaurant I built, I laid the linoleum on the floor myself. I don't do any of that anymore. My focus is on thinking now. I still amuse myself when I can pick up a paper off the floor faster than the busboy. I do love wiping down the bathroom when I use it in my restaurant – it keeps me humble. I still consider it my job.

Staying humble is important. My management style is hands-on and I'm thinking of new ideas all the time. If we have a good idea, it's like finding gold – it's like prospecting.

I escape with the art I do and some of it is in my new restaurant – that's fun too. I have a lot of escapes. I go duck-hunting and pheasant shooting – I have a lot of avocations.

How did your interest in art come about?

My father used to take me to museums all the time. He worked in a factory and was a pretty humble guy. I remember going as a teenager to the Arts Students League.

You've had an exciting life with a lot of success. How important is it for you to remember where you came from?

At home, I have a three-foot photograph of the L train that used to pass my apartment on Walton Avenue in the Bronx. When I look at that, I remember where I came from.

Alongside that, I have a picture of the Hip Bagel on MacDougal Street. I look at that and remember laying the linoleum. When I look at my Mercedes-Benz today, I remember the first car I had and it makes me appreciate things so much more.

It also helps keep you humble when you scrub down the sink after you wash your hands.

Do you ever just relax?

I'm always relaxed. Picking up the piece of paper not only makes me smile but it's good exercise. I have a real sense of pride. I'm saying hello and thanking the management all the time.

Do you value the importance of the time that guests spend at your restaurants?

God bless restaurants because people do need that social interaction. It's in our DNA to need companionship and interaction, to be able to express ourselves and have someone else just listen to us babble. We complement that by ensuring we give people a pleasurable experience as they do this.

As your company has grown, how do you maintain its family feel?

If you met the guys in the company, you would understand. It's like a canoe trip. You select companions whom you really like and I have selected the most wonderful people. That's why it's not corporate. People run



these businesses and they bring their own personalities, expressions, and input. We care what they have to say since they're in touch with all of our guests.

Are you really having this much fun?

I'm having fun except for the times I'm not having fun. I judge happiness and having fun as not having pain. Every time pain comes, you try to fight it like hell.

Is there anything else you are focused on?

I ask myself what I am contributing to the people who read an article like this. If my mother saw it, would she be proud? Finding ways to contribute is what is important to me.

Do you have the organizational infrastructure to support the growth of the company?

We have about 1,500 employees and we are very organized. We truly know our marketplaces – we're not going to make Mexican food for somebody else because that is not what we know. We could be good at other things if we wanted to but I don't want to learn something new when we can excel at what we already do know.

Would you talk about the new restaurant, Florian?

It's Italian, contemporary, and designed individually. I designed it in collaboration with a guy named David Korins who is a New York Broadway theater designer. I took him to Italy, we traveled to my home and around the area, and we designed this beautiful place.

My artwork is in there. I recently added five more pieces to the 12 pieces of art already there. However, I don't want people to come for the art but for the food. Art is only part of adding to the personality of the place.

Florian's menu is contemporary and the prices are right for the marketplace. It's moderately priced and everything on the menu is something I would want to eat, which means I'm really proud of what the chefs have delivered. The hospitality is ours, everyone in there smiles, and the place will make you smile as well. It really is like coming home. There is no pretension, silliness, or arrogance – it's really great.

We have had the same customers for 35 years at Fiorellos and 25 years at Trattoria Dell 'Arte. I still talk to a friend from high school every day – this is the kind of low-key humble people we are – working hard and appreciating where we came from. ●