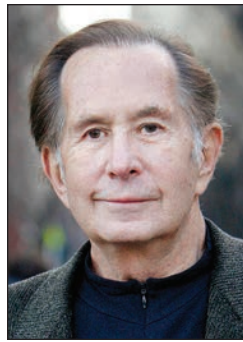




Long-Term Focus

An 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 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, which is 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.



Sheldon Fireman

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 makes Fireman Hospitality work so well?

We focus on what the guest needs and wants, on being hospitable, and then we know they're going to come back. We don't think about short-term profits; our focus is long-range. Every day, we try to please other human beings and, as a result, they please us.

Is there a common thread throughout the properties you have now?

There is but I won't tell anybody because I became an expert at it via trial and error.

Are there still growth opportunities within New York where you already have a strong presence?

Not until the bubble breaks and the landlords become more humble and smarter, don't overpay for property, and until they learn more about the restaurant business than the numbers, I see no growth.

Are you optimistic that is going to change?

I'm not optimistic. I think some landlords we deal with are getting wiser every day but it's a still a struggle. It's a strange business that they're in and we don't understand their numbers and they don't understand our numbers.

Where will growth come from?

We are working with three major developers right now on the East Coast. There are great opportunities in America overall. There are also always opportunities for mom-and-pop operators – someone who wants to stay in the kitchen all day and cook while their wife is on the dining room floor or vice versa. There is always room for a candy store type operation.

We're dealing with two kinds of landlords: the developing kind, those who see if they can add value to something and merchandise. They're the best guys to deal with. Then we have those landlords who are only looking for a return.

I'm not upset or angry; I feel badly for the guy who overpaid and highly leveraged his business, and needs that return. I feel bad for the restaurateur who cannot pay what's being asked.

Will you look to extend the existing brands outside of New York or will you develop additional brands?

I'm very excited about the future, in particular my new location opposite Hamilton. I have all of the theater people involved so that will be a successful adventure.

I wish I was as excited about the rest of Manhattan.

Do you always put the hospitality part first, despite the numbers?

The numbers are always there, but I put them in the back of my mind. The business doesn't work without the numbers. We're pathological about them.

In an industry where it's hard to retain talent, what do you look for in hiring people?

It's more about who brought them up – I ask them about their parents.

It's really about finding good people who are born happy and project that happiness.

As you continue to grow, is it harder to be as hands-on in all aspects of the business?

Absolutely, but thankfully, I'm working with the same people year after year and they've become very smart as we've grown. Without them, I could not do this because it would be too much responsibility.

Will you touch on your passion for art and the fulfillment you get from that?

Passion means pain so I don't have any passion. I have a good time. It makes me smile. I went to sculpture school as a young boy – it's part of who I am. My father used to take me to museums. I don't remember a day that I wasn't interested in art.

Is the sculpture a business for you?

No, it's a way of going inside of myself, and being quiet and reflecting.

Staying relevant today is so challenging. How do you do it?

We get up every day and we go to work, and we're humble enough to determine how we screwed something up and how we can un-screw it up.

Every year, I have five guys in Europe moving among different countries and learning all the time. We also have a network of spies throughout the world that feed us information.

With all your activities, do you take time to appreciate your successes?

I get pleasure from them. It's awkward when somebody gives me that compliment. I'm so appreciative, but I always feel a little funny about it and feel I can do better.

I do, of course, appreciate what I have achieved.

What is it like to work for you?

When I'm good, I'm very, very good; when I'm bad, I'm a pain in the neck.

Although some suggest it can be lonely in positions of power, you seem to maintain strong friendships.

Yes, but I wish I had a bit more alone time. Lonely is quiet time for me.

Looking ahead, what are you most focused on?

We're very focused on the upcoming opportunities, as well as tweaking what we currently have. We look backwards in order to keep an eye on what we have created and make sure we are bringing things up to date. We look at what will be long-term trends as opposed to superficial trends, and always at how we can please the guests. ●