



A Diverse Brand

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

EDITORS' NOTE A native of Lyon, France, Chef-turned-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 first made his fame 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.danielnyc.com) owns and operates 10 restaurants by Daniel Boulud, five in New York – DANIEL, a Relais & Châteaux member; Bar Boulud; db Bistro Moderne; Café Boulud; and, most recently, DBGB Kitchen and Bar – with a second Café Boulud in Palm Beach, Florida, in the Brazilian Court Hotel; Maison Boulud in Beijing; Vancouver's db Bistro Moderne and the Relais & Châteaux restaurant, Lumière. His first restaurant in the U.K., Bar Boulud, opened in London's Mandarin Oriental in May 2010. Two new outposts opening in the year ahead include a db Bistro Moderne for both Miami and Singapore.

You now have a range of locations in New York. How do those complement one another?

The diversification of my brand has helped on all counts with customers going upstream or downstream within the brand. They go from DANIEL down to our other restaurants including DBGB, and in a very consistent manner. Also, younger customers, who discover the less expensive brands, are going upstream to experience DANIEL because they had a great experience in a more casual way where they found value, which is important today; actually, it's always been essential.

In New York, the ultimate dining experience is at DANIEL, which can amount to about \$250 per person for dinner; Café Boulud runs about \$100; db Bistro about \$70; Bar Boulud at around \$50; and DBGB is even a little cheaper, depending on how much you choose to eat.

Even at DBGB, where the price is more moderate, you still offer a high level of



Daniel Boulud (center top) and Chefs (top-left to right): Raphael Haas, Fabrizio Salerni, Dale Mackay, Gregory Stawowy; Bottom – left to right: Chefs Jean François Bruel (DANIEL), Jim Leiken (DBGB Kitchen and Bar), Damian Sansonetti (Bar Boulud), Laurent Kalkotour (db Bistro Moderne), Gavin Kaysen (Café Boulud)

service, quality, and innovation. How do you maintain that consistency at each of your destinations?

The most important elements are the individual teams in each restaurant and our management company. This is the aspect of my restaurants a guest never sees, but that they certainly experience. Today, we have a very well-structured management company that includes departments for menu planning and recipe development via three corporate chefs, operations, and quality control via three operations directors, human resources and training, wine and beverage, purchasing, facilities maintenance, public relations, marketing and communications, and, last but not least, finance and accounting. The management group, now 21 executives strong, provides ongoing planning, support, and guidance to each restaurant in the group.

Just as important, we spend a lot of time training and challenging our managers to perform better all the time.

A restaurant is not something you can just open and then walk away from. We create something new and then make sure we keep working hard at it. db Bistro on 44th Street is 10 years old, and we are still working as hard as we did on the first day. We take nothing for granted, constantly maintaining our quality, refreshing our menus, introducing new wines, and creating special events. Our customers appreciate what we do beyond just opening the door every day and doing business.

You have built a team of executive chefs at each of these destinations who are able to maintain your standards and quality. What are the key ingredients for a good chef, and how critical has it been to find that type of talent?

That talent has to have good training, and first and foremost, has to relate to me. We collaborate. I may be the mentor, but our relationship is based on mutual respect and trust. They have to be good leaders, but team players

as well. They have to have good character and be creative, ambitious, and organized, as well as being good businessmen. Each of my executive chefs must himself be a mentor for the cooks in his kitchen.

We groom them. Sometimes we take a young sous-chef, who has talent but who hasn't yet carried

the responsibility of running a business, and make him the big chef. We support that process with our two corporate chefs. So it's in-house management coaching the team, communicating, and trying to motivate them to keep the place clean and healthy while performing.

How much freedom do you give them? The menus are always changing and there is much innovation. Is it important for you to be engaged in that, or do you allow them the opportunity to create?

Once you become an executive chef, you have to be able to make decisions spontaneously. I encourage my executive chefs to create a daily special, a plat du jour; they have 100 percent authority on that.

If they want to put a dish on the à la carte menu for a whole season, I need to approve it and make sure we're making the right decision on it. It has to be consistent day in and day out, and we have to make sure that the supply and preparation are even.

As the chef, is it tough to not always be in the kitchen since your time is now being pulled in many different directions?

Yes, but at the same time, I enjoy as much being in London, Beijing, Singapore, or Vancouver with my teams because they're part of my family.

Whether you have one restaurant or 20, it's a pity when you have to be the cook on the line to cover a lunch or dinner service. If they need you for that, it means there's a real structural problem. Once in awhile, I cover for my chef, but I am doing service with everyone – I am floating, I am going to the dining room taking orders, following service. My responsibility is not only cooking in one station. Certainly, when the kitchen is made of 10 stations, I cannot attend to all of them. There is no magic formula – it takes a good team, and in our business, people make that happen. ●