



Julian Niccolini (right) with co-owner Alex von Bidder

Filled with the Movers and Shakers of New York City

An Interview with
Julian Niccolini, Co-Owner, 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 winemaker dinners in the U.S. and is considered one of the most influential tastemakers in the world.

RESTAURANT BRIEF Situated just off Park Avenue in the Seagram Building in Midtown Manhattan, Four Seasons (www.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 redefining American cuisine since 1959.

Does your business reflect an economic recovery for New York?

Business is coming back. People realize that in order to make money you have to spend money, meaning that it's a wonderful time to start entertaining your guests again in fine restaurants.

I know people are moving downtown but I'm happy to see that midtown Manhattan is coming back to life again, and this will continue. Our fall looks very good and our summer was better than last year.

For those who may feel intimidated by the reputation of your restaurant, how do you make it feel accessible?

I don't think people should be concerned about walking into a place filled with the movers and shakers of New York City. People should be extremely happy because we treat everybody with the same level of service and the same food. We have people who come in every day so we know what they like, but we respect all people the same because every dollar is the same.

How do you continue to innovate with your menu?

We have to change our menu all the time to avoid the food getting stale and the people in the kitchen getting tired.

So we have to try to find a new item every day and make new dishes every day to present to our customers – it's why they come back.

How do you find a balance between providing tasty food but ensuring it is healthy?

From the beginning, the Four Seasons Restaurant attempted to always prepare seasonal items but for a while, we stopped because the mood changed. Over the past 15 or 20 years, people have come back to their senses.

We understand that people go to restaurants to be served and entertained but also to feel good about themselves. We have to make sure the food we provide, serve, and cook is good food that you can eat on a daily basis.

Our most important focus is making sure that the food we're preparing is as simple as possible. We don't believe in adding butter or cream where it isn't needed – we serve the freshest food in the most simple way.

Is all that this restaurant does in terms of helping charities in the community by hosting events well understood?

We do a lot of private events at Four Seasons where people take over the entire restaurant and we have to support them. We do this because the events benefit the local community and most of these events are done with our regular clientele.

Is it tough to replicate this restaurant and to envision branching out?

When people talk about the Four Seasons Restaurant, most of the time they talk about service and food.

The Four Seasons represents the best of cuisine and service – the most important things we have going for us. There are a lot of people who would like us to open in different places, and that would be nice. Maybe the time has come for us to think about an additional location, but we have to be careful to remember our home base.

How do you define what makes a good server for your restaurant today?

We hire people who really enjoy working in the restaurant business. A server needs the ability to deal well with people, to make people happy, and to give excellent service to people. Being professional is not good enough anymore.

There are those who say the days of class are gone. Do you agree?

For intelligent people who care about how they look, the days of class are here to stay. It's important to dress up and act accordingly – these are the prerequisites that identify a very successful businessperson.

When people are dressed properly and behave properly, they get more out of life than those who don't take care of themselves.

Many guests expect to see you or Alex (von Bidder, Co-Owner) when they arrive. Will it be tough to transfer some of that responsibility at some point?

No, we have some really nice people working at the Four Seasons Restaurant. We have many people at the Four Seasons who can take over this business at any given time. I know that it's important to have consistency since I have been doing this a long time. Alex or I are in every day and sometimes, we're both here.

We have given our people enough leeway to occasionally make mistakes but they really have not. Once people know what the expectation is, they always move in that direction – they're definitely going to be respectful of the place and the people.

Is it ever possible for you to go to another restaurant to have dinner and just relax without taking notes?

No, I'm always observing. You look for the best a restaurant is offering so you can come back to your restaurant and implement some of those ideas.

The most important thing in service is to be nice to people – and truly nice, not fake nice. It's what successful venues in this particular industry have going for us.

Do you still enjoy the business after all these years?

Yes. I feel like a young guy. If you drink good wine and eat good food, you never have to work out. It's also very expensive to run a restaurant like this. However, there aren't many places in New York City where you can sit in a space like this and enjoy your \$58-pre-fixe lunch or \$78-pre-fixe dinner or a \$24-pre-fixe lunch at the bar.

We give value to our clientele, which is why many people come on a daily basis.

What has made this location stand the test of time?

When you are in a building like this, you must have a restaurant of this quality and one that delivers food and service to the clientele, but that also gives tremendous prestige back to the building itself. ●