

Hospitality

Fireman's Future

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 Cafe 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,



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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 Cafe 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 common characteristics make a restaurant specifically a Fireman?

It has some of my personality, be that good or bad. There is an abundance of art in all of my restaurants, and the art is very personal and it's not bought by a designer and put up on the wall – it's a very personal thing. Nobody designs the restaurants from an architectural point of view, from an interior designer point of view, from a restaurant designer point of view – it's always from my point of view in relationship to the guests and how I want to welcome them

into my restaurants. This is what hospitality is all about.

We help people to feel really comfortable and good. We try to prepare the food as consistently as possible, and make it familiar and traditional but also give it a twist and a personality. We don't have to shout that we do things all organic because that is typical for us. Whoever comes to our house is going to eat healthy, is going to pig out, and is going to have options.

You may not like the personality, but it is uniquely ours.

We have been around a long time and very few restaurants can say that. There is a sense these guys really care, no matter who they are.

How do you make sure, with such a loyal following, that you keep your traditions but remain current?

We work hard. There is no other answer. I had seven guys traveling in Europe and Italy this past summer alone because we're going to build a new restaurant on 46th Street. We steal any good idea that isn't nailed down.

We're working on that vacation, always looking at what is contemporary in Berlin, Naples, Rome, Florence, Belgium, and Paris.

We're humble, which we have to be to absorb other people's information and wisdom, and we ask a lot of questions.

Will you look for continued opportunity in New York?

New York is an overpriced town. We would definitely like to move on, but in order to do that we have to get out there and meet people. It's a job to go out and convey our story. We have formulated some wonderful ideas to take over the food courts in shopping centers. Now we have to find the right player.

Our Brooklyn Diners are phenomenal. We have a bunch of new guys who have been training with us for a number of years and they have been raring to go.

The future of the food business is not New York – it's Europe and America. The Brooklyn Diner belongs in Berlin, and in every major city in Europe and South America.

The restaurant business over the next 10 years will become a major focus with shopping centers, but they will get hung up on putting in the most boring chains one could imagine. As the customer becomes more sophisticated, the chains won't follow – they're too slow.

At day's end, is food the priority or is it the experience?

It's both and we've been around a long time because we touch all the bases. We don't do this perfectly; we can always do it better, but we work at it, so it all adds up.

Has the interest in eating healthy impacted what you order?

We were the first guys in America to ever put on the menu, "If you have an allergy, please tell us because we can accommodate you." My son was born with allergies, my wife is a vegetarian, we're into homeopathy, and we are fixated on trying to stay alive and be healthy, so we're going to give that to our guests. We have giant vegetable antipasto bars, and we can cook it your way. I have a customer with peanut allergies and they brought their own frying pans and we cooked with those because we weren't even going to trust our own pans.

Do you hire to maintain that consistent family feel?

We have the most wonderful, talented, and crazy people. We retain them because it's about ethics.

We live with each other's imperfections. We're kind, thoughtful, and understanding and we're humble enough to take criticism; everybody wants to improve. It's not robotic hospitality – it's genuinely warm and embracing.

Are you focused on what's to come?

It's the future that is more exciting than the present. I'm hoping to work with the right developer because I know what the future ought to be. I know we've got fast casual that no one in this country has and that very few people can execute.

We have the Brooklyn Diners and Clubhouses. We are a collection of American, Italian, and steakhouse. With our new place, Florian on 18th Street, we're catering to another price point that appeals to a real millennial kind of young person, and they can go onto social media and find out about it. So we're focusing on many different crowds.

Do you ever stop and appreciate what you've built?

I have been so amazed. I know that there are many more things to come and it makes me internalize the smile and the appreciation for what America has given me and the opportunity that I could only have here. ●