

## Standing the Test of Time

An Interview with Julian Niccolini, Co-Owner, Four Seasons Restaurant



Julian Niccolini (right) with his partner, Alex von Bidder, in the Pool Room at the Four Seasons

**EDITORS' NOTE** Julian Niccolini studied hospitality in Rome and apprenticed in Monaco's Hôtel de Paris. He arrived in New York in 1975 and worked at New York City's Palace restaurant before being recruited to manage the Four Seasons Restaurants' 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** Four Seasons ([www.fourseasonsrestaurant.com](http://www.fourseasonsrestaurant.com)) is one of New York's foremost dining establishments, situated just off Park Avenue in the Seagram Building in Midtown Manhattan. 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.

**Many places don't stand the test of time. How has Four Seasons remained so consistent over the years?**

First, our location was designed by Philip Johnson and Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, who are two of the most influential architects and designers of our time, which is incredible. You don't have another restaurant in New York or America that has been designed to last for this period of time. It was truly designed to be a restaurant instead of a showroom that you make into a restaurant. After us, if whoever

takes over pays attention to the physical aspects of the restaurant, it's going to last until the building comes down.

The restaurant was also designed with the original intent to change the food every season, which is an important point – today, many are copying this same idea. Finally, people are beginning to understand food is seasonal, so you should only use items that are appropriate for that season. This means items that are grown pretty close to where the restaurant is located. We've tried to do that for a long time but sometimes our customers want tomatoes in the winter. Although we know they do not grow during the winter in this part of the world, we find a way of accommodating them. But we're dedicated to what we do, we're passionate about our work, and we respect our customers for whom we try to provide the best service we can. We also don't have to overcharge our clientele because this place is bigger than many others.

**While you offer great tasting food, do you also attempt to provide healthy food?**

Yes. We work at using as little butter as possible and not using any fatty food. A lot of French or Italian restaurants today use a lot of pork products, especially lard, and everybody thinks it tastes so good. It might taste delicious, but it's not good for you.

So we focus on olive oil, and on bringing to our customer the freshest product and the one that will make you feel good after eating it.

Our philosophy is to make our restaurant a place you should go every day; it's not just for a special occasion. We have an incredibly loyal clientele whether they sit in the Pool Room or Grill Room. It's a place that should become part of your daily life because we have proof from our customers who have been coming here for 30 years – none of them look like they have gained weight because they eat very good food that is simply prepared, which is the best way to prepare food. To add all of these other items on top of food is not our style, which is another reason why we've been able to survive.

**In an industry where service people come and go, you see the same faces here.**

That's our great fortune. We are very pleased that our people are able to stay here for a long time. Occasionally, I feel it's a little unfortunate because after our staff has gained so much experience, I sometimes think they should go elsewhere and experience what

others are doing. Hopefully, if they did go elsewhere, they would be able to make more money because they have been associated with such a good restaurant.

**With that longevity, how much effort do you spend on training?**

It works like a machine because these people have been doing this for a long time. We try to make it as easy as possible for our employees to understand the process – it's not a difficult one. We try to hire the best people we can, which we define as people who love interacting with and pleasing customers. I tell them that if they're not having a good day, go home and come back when you're feeling better, because not everybody is perfect on a daily basis. But this is a people business, so you need to act in the same fashion even if you're not in a good mood; there will be days when this is not a good place for you to be.



**You can do almost any kind of event?**

We try to do as much as we can because it's very important. If we have a regular customer who wants to get married here, we're going to do a wedding for him or her, even if it means we need to cover the pool in the Pool Room or rent the entire plaza outside for up to 500 people. We host philanthropic events as well as breakfasts for 50 to 100 people – we recently had a 300-party breakfast. The beauty of that is we get to serve breakfast, lunch, and dinner on those days, so it's non-stop.

**Do you eat here every day?**

Yes.

**And you stay healthy.**

Yes, it's simple and the best food available. ●

The Four Seasons' Grill Room