

## Consistency and Quality

An Interview with William J. Degel,  
Founder and Chief Executive Officer, Uncle Jack's Steakhouse



Willie Degel (above); Uncle Jack's restaurant on Manhattan's West 56th Street (below)

**EDITORS' NOTE** William "Willie" Jack Degel, godson of the famous "Jack," carries on his tradition of excellence and commitment to the best quality imaginable. In addition to his current post, he is also Founder and CEO of Meat House, Steak Sandwich Shop (now closed), and Jack's Shack. He was the first restaurateur to bring Kobe beef to New York City, and has also developed his own line of sauces. In addition, he is host of the Food Network's Restaurant Stakeout and star of Food Fortunes.

**COMPANY BRIEF** Since its inception in 1996, Uncle Jack's ([unclejacks.com](http://unclejacks.com)) has become legendary for unsurpassed consistency and quality. Serving the best steak in New York means featuring the finest USDA Prime Beef, cut to their exact specifications and aged between 28 and 35 days. World-famous Kobe steaks and a full menu of the finest foods available, are just a few more reasons why Uncle Jack's has become a steakhouse landmark.

**Will you touch on each of your concepts and how you've maintained so much success in such a tough business?**

Today, we have to be as versatile as possible. Jack's Shack is my fast, casual-themed restaurant with a \$10-\$15 check average. We control the labor as much as possible while putting out high-quality food, and the chef can do that because we have the buying power from Uncle Jack's.

The next concept, Uncle Jack's Meat House, I opened in Duluth and that's a higher end cool grille – very hip and good for families or executives. Anybody can come and have a great steak and enjoy a great atmosphere and service, but there are no tablecloths. Lunch is \$20-\$35, and dinner is \$45-\$65.

Then we have the high-end Uncle Jack's, where at lunch we do anywhere from \$30-\$75 depending on what people are eating. At dinner, people spend \$75-\$150 per person.

Once I get the second Meat House open in Astoria, I will develop a Jack's Tavern, which will be a version of the Meat House and Jack's Shack together but with a cool bar and waitress atmosphere and that check average will be \$25-\$30 per person.

**Do you anticipate growth for all of the brands?**

Looking at growth today, the hottest thing is cheap, quick, and fast. It's something I never did well. Technology has also changed so that has helped change the whole atmosphere for

people – they're disconnected so going out to dine is not a huge experience like it once was. Young people go to places that are known for doing one thing really well, so we have to stick with that.

**How hard is it to get messaging out to show the difference at your venues?**

It's tough to get people to break their habits but everybody wants to be a part of the next new thing. In addition, huge public companies are in the restaurant business today, and they're coming into these cities and squashing the little guys.



They do it because they're playing with other people's money, so they're building the brands but they're sabotaging themselves. They care about the stock price but not about how much the restaurants are making.

**Is there real differentiation in the actual food?**

Yes. There are certain meat purveyors who are buying from all these areas, but it's a lot of marketing too. Many places have everything done for them. At Uncle Jack's, we dry-age all of our own products in-house; in our stores, I train my sous chef how to butcher and cut our meat. We're very old-school here.

**Have the realty shows and celebrity chefs been good for the industry?**

The Food Network is running a celebrity chop show. My show was educational and taught people how to be in this business. Everyone wants to be in this business until they get into it and they realize how much it takes to run it. You either live it and own it or you're done today.

It's a cleansing process. There are a lot of newcomers to the restaurant business. I wanted my show on the Food Network to show what it really takes to run a restaurant.

We're here to serve guests, and we're only as good as our last meal served.

**How important is it to find people invested in the business, and can you provide careers for them?**

Of course, but people aren't as loyal to employers anymore, and people feel they're entitled so the same staff doesn't stick around as they once did.

**Where are future opportunities for you?**

I want to do a few more Jack's Shacks, but I'd rather open in other cities that are more business friendly than New York.

**How hard is it to drive profit in the New York City market?**

Harder than ever. Anything in this industry that is free is going to disappear. Portions are shrinking by the minute because we can't keep raising our prices. Service is going away, so we have to do more with less and we have to serve less, but food isn't getting cheaper, and alcohol goes up every invoice. We're going to have a cleansing period, so we have to reinvent and be part of the next way or hold down as best we can and figure out where to go.

**Is going public important to you?**

It has always been a goal of mine, but it's extremely expensive to do it and the timing has to be right. I believe entrepreneurs should be creating employment instead of the government – we do it smarter, better, more efficiently, and a lot cheaper.

**As such a hands-on operator, is it hard for you to step back?**

Without a doubt. We've become a software-based system, and I have people overseeing the stores and holding everyone accountable.

It will keep evolving. As long as everyone understands that the customer is king and without them we're nothing, and no one is cutting corners, we'll do well.

In this business, you learn a lot. You meet people, develop relationships, and become confident. You become part of a team. The energy is beautiful. It's a great way to build a resume and also for people to find themselves.

**Is the work ethic still strong with the younger generation?**

No, and they're very distracted. The iPhone has wrecked people.

**Is this business still fun?**

Being an entrepreneur is in my DNA. I love building things and problem-solving, but I love taking care of people most of all, and when I build a team, I'm ready to go to war with them. ●