

CORNELL HOTEL SCHOOL

SPRING 2009

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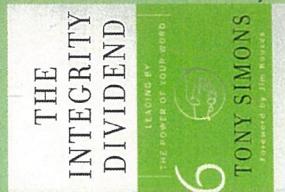


Putting an Entrepreneurial Dream on the Map



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CORNELL HOTEL SCHOOL
Magazine

SPRING 2009

Published three times annually by
the School of Hotel Administration at Cornell University.

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Office of External Relations, 19 Sibley Hall, Cornell
University, Ithaca, NY 14853.

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Produced by Office of Public Relations and Marketing
and Printed by Finger Lakes Press on recycled
paper. ISSN 1052-0903



Four-Star Career: A Conversation with Drew Nieporent



Drew Nieporent '77 has opened 31 restaurants in 23 years, building his Myriad Restaurant Group into an empire that generates \$100 million in annual sales. He has transformed Manhattan's once overlooked TriBeCa district into a dining destination. His business partners include actors Robert De Niro, Sean Penn, and Bill Murray and dancer Mikhail Baryshnikov. He has won countless awards, both as restaurateur and as philanthropist. His restaurants have been honored in similar fashion, earning acclaim from the field's toughest critics.

He may well be the most accomplished restaurateur of his generation.

"Drew is an impresario," said Giuseppe Pezzotti '94 MMH '96, a senior lecturer in food and beverage management at the School of Hotel Administration. "He knows how to bring different people together on a team and make it all work."

Throughout this rise Nieporent has held true to the aspiring entrepreneur who showed up at Statler Hall as a freshman in 1974. He is loyal to his school, playing host to classes at his restaurants in Manhattan and returning to campus to lecture as he did last fall. He is equally faithful to his fellow alumni. Not long ago Skip Sack '61 called Nieporent to see if he could arrange a reservation for his daughter and her friends at Nobu New York. Sack left a message, expecting to hear back from one of Nobu's employees.

But a few seconds later Nieporent returned the call, speaking in hushed tones. "Drew, where are you?" Sack asked. "I'm at the U.S. Open," Nieporent whispered. "They don't allow cell phones here. When I felt my phone vibrate, I stepped into the bathroom so I could call you back."

Nieporent's journey began just a few blocks from the TriBeCa neighborhood that now serves as his base. He grew up on Manhattan's East Side, raised by a father who did business with restaurants around the city. He would often accompany his father to those restaurants, and he developed a passion for food and cooking at an early age. As a teenager Nieporent took every job he could, working as a kitchen hand at a camp, at a McDonald's, and as a prep person at the Duck Joint in Manhattan.

During holidays and summers over his college years, Nieporent worked on several cruises. After graduation he joined the team at Maxwell's Plum in New York and then its sister restaurant, Tavern on the Green. Later, after a successful stint as manager of 24

and the Rainbow Room. He was a pioneer. He did lots of things, and they were all different. That's what I wanted to do.

Q. Who has had the greatest influence on you as a chef?

A. Remember that the French dominated the field of fine dining in the 1960s. Several French chefs reached across and accepted young Americans. Jean Louis Palladin, Daniel Boulud, and Michel Richard were all very generous with me. Wolfgang Puck was another influence. When he opened Spago, he changed the way people eat in America.

Q. At Cornell, you've said that your greatest learning came from your fellow students.

A. I had never been around such a diverse group. When you're surrounded by people from every part of the world, you begin to see things a bit differently, made friends with people from all over—the South, Scandinavia, the Caribbean. Many of those friendships endure today.

Q. What professors inspired you to follow your entrepreneurial instincts?

A. Vance Christian lit a spark under us. Stephen Mirkoski cared about us and took an interest in us; I did not study under him, but Giuseppe Pezzotti works hard to build bonds between alumni and the school.

Q. You worked on several cruise lines as a student. How did that opportunity come about?

A. I was walking past the dean's office one day when I saw a notice on the bulletin board from Norwegian American Lines. It was a life-changing moment. At age 18, I was working cruise ships to Scandinavia and northern Europe. It was like my military service. We served breakfast, lunch, and dinner for 600, seven days a week. Add in midnight snacks and afternoon teas, and you're on your feet almost all the time. It was great exposure to the travel industry. It also helped me realize the magnitude of what you can do professionally.

Q. You opened your first restaurant, Montrachet, at age 29. That was 23 years ago. What has changed about Drew Nieporent?

A. When you're young, you have a "conquer the world" mentality. As you age, you begin to feel your mortality.

Fifth Avenue, Nieporent spent a year in Europe, where he studied under leading restaurateurs.

When he returned to New York, Nieporent worked as captain of several restaurants, including Le Perigord. In 1985 he opened his first restaurant, Montrachet, on Franklin Street in TriBeCa (which stands for Triangle below Canal). He has gone on to open seven more restaurants in the neighborhood: Nobu, Nobu Next Door, the Tribeca Grill, Layla, Centrico, Trifecta, and Corton.

Nieporent shows no signs of slowing down. His newest restaurant, Corton, opened this fall at the same site where Montrachet operated for 21 years. In fact, he says he still has one big dream he wants to realize. We talked about that and many other things when I caught up with him over lunch this winter at the Tribeca Grill.

Q. You've been called the Mayor of Franklin Street for your role in helping lead the restoration of TriBeCa. Have you exceeded your own expectations?

A. I had a clear vision when I was younger. My father was an attorney with the New York State Liquor Authority. He did a lot of business with restaurants, and he would take my brother and me with him. That's how I got exposed to the theater of restaurants. Later, I watched what Joe Baum did with Windows on the World

Q. You say a service mentality cannot be taught—that people have it or they don't. When you interview prospective employees, how can you tell those who from those who don't?

A. When I opened my first restaurant, I was hiring people of my generation. I was in tune, and I could see if they had fire in the belly. Now, it's a little harder to understand what drives young people. I used to hire only experienced people and then train them in our way. But at Nobu, we were forced to hire people with no experience and then train them, and that actually worked better. I used to have a rule that no one got hired until they came through me. But we now have over 1,000 employees, so I can't do that.

Q. You like to travel to someplace new once a month. How does that help you keep your restaurants on the cutting edge?

A. It's important to see how other people do what you do. Over dinner in San Francisco recently, we ordered a bottle of wine. About halfway through the meal, we wanted another bottle. But by then the server was preoccupied. So they lost the sale of the second bottle. The lesson there was, when you bring the first bottle, ask then if the customer might want a second bottle.

Q. You're partners with some of the world's most famous people. Tell us how that came to be.

A. Robert De Niro was a regular at Montrachet. One afternoon, he came up and told me he had a vision for a restaurant, just like directors are cast in Hollywood, he cast me to direct what he envisioned. The result was Tribeca Grill.

Q. What would you say is your greatest professional accomplishment?

A. I am most proud of how long we have sustained our restaurants. Montrachet was 21 years. Tribeca Grill is at 18 years. Nobu, 15 years. Ribbon in San Francisco was 14 years. That's a long time in this business.

Q. You talk about the importance of details. Give a detail you notice walking into a restaurant that a less discerning eye might not pick up.

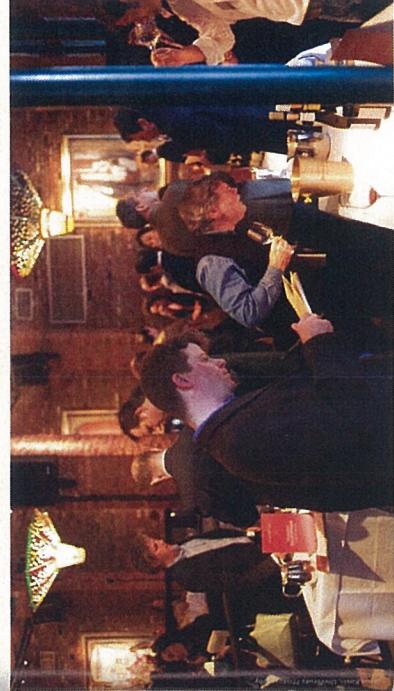
A. Many restaurants lack adequate lighting. You need to see the food. Everything has to be in place. How you position the chairs, how you lay the tablecloths. That's how you create a sense of decorum.

Q. Outside of the restaurants you own, name one place you really like to eat.

A. I love the Failllevent in Paris. Owner Jean-Claude Vynat, who passed away in January, was hospitable and generous. Today most restaurants are marketed around the talents of the chef. But Failllevent's image is less with the chef and more with Jean-Claude. I like to eat in Chinatown, and of course I'm comfortable at my colleagues' restaurants—Otoño, Babbo, Daniel, and Café des Artistes.

Q. What is your favorite meal?

A. Pasta.



A wine tasting at Tribeca Grill



Drew Nieporent greets diners at Corton.

Q. You've had a show on the Food Network. How much do you cook today?

A. I like to grill at home. Pork chops, strip steak, rack of ribs.

Q. No one bats a thousand. Tell us about a venture that did not meet your expectations.

A. I like to think that none of my restaurants failed creatively, but a few were not financially successful. Berkeley Bar and Grill and Heartbeat in the W Hotel are two. Most restaurants showcase the chef. When the chef moves on, you have to fix the soul of the concept. It's like a Broadway show that opens to rave reviews because of the script, the directors, and the actors. When the directors and actors move on, the show is not the same.

Q. How do you avoid working all the time?

A. I don't. Anytime you open a new restaurant, you will be working all the time.

Q. You're doing that now. Last October, you and chef Paul Montrachet opened Corton in the same location where Liebrandt opened in 1985 to 2006. How is that going?

A. Very well. We have received three stars from *The New York Times* and similar reviews from *Forbes* magazine and others. I've learned a great deal through the process. When our old customers come back, I often hear, "Oh my God, I can't believe what you've done to this place." To me, there is no better example of what is meant by the term "good will" on a balance sheet. Now it is up to us to please them.

Q. What do you do to unwind?

A. I enjoy music—Springsteen, U2, the Who, the Rolling Stones, the Beatles, classic rock in general. I'm also a huge sports fan. I grew up following the Knicks, Rangers, Jets, and Giants. I also enjoy a cigar.

Q. What is left for you to do?

A. I have been a restaurateur underdog. My restaurants in Tribeca are off the beaten path. You have to make a trip to get there. I want to do a restaurant in a landmark location—something along the magnitude of Windows on the World.

Q. Describe the restaurant you're developing for Citi Field, the new home of the New York Mets in 2009.

A. We're working with ARAMARK and the Mets to raise the bar on food service at the ballpark. It will be a grill: steaks, chops, and the like.

Q. Tell us about your family.

A. My wife, Ann, and I have been married for 22 years. We met in a restaurant I used to manage. My son, Andrew, is studying liberal arts at Ramapo College. He plays the guitar, writes songs, and recently interned at *Rolling Stone* magazine. My daughter, Gabrielle, is a junior in high school and is starting to look at colleges now.

Q. You've been recognized for your philanthropic endeavors.

You sit on the board of Meals on Wheels, which provides meals to the elderly. You contribute to Taste of the NFL, which supports world hunger. You actively support many other charitable efforts. What inspired your interest in helping those less fortunate?

Q. Do you value feedback from patrons?

A. Growing up, I was influenced by the civil rights movement. Martin Luther King, Bobby Kennedy. I am also the product of two very generous parents. They taught us the lesson of treating people as you would treat yourself.

Always. My mother, Sybil, and her friends were among the first customers at one of our restaurants. Afterward, my mother raved about how much she and her friends liked the bathroom. Up until then, I had not thought of the bathroom as a revenue-generating area.

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By Bill Summers