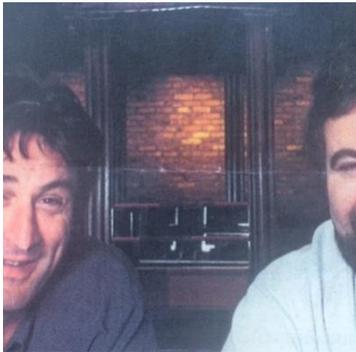


Happy 25th birthday, Tribeca Grill

Written by Nick Lander 20 Oct 2015

A quarter-century is a long time in any relationship, whether amorous or business. For a restaurant to survive this long is most unusual. Tastes change. Partners, initially the best of friends, fall out or want to go in different directions, and leases come to an end, even if some restaurateurs manage to fend off the threat of redevelopment from landlords keen to maximise the value of their freehold properties.



So the fact that Tribeca Grill, opened in 1990 by restaurateur Drew Nieporent in partnership with Robert De Niro in what was back then considered to be a relatively dodgy part of New York, has just reached this landmark is a cause for celebration. We and many others helped Drew celebrate in considerable style alongside his brother Tracy, who joined him several years after the restaurant opened.

Nieporent's long association with De Niro began at Tribeca Grill. The actor decided he wanted to own a restaurant and sensibly teamed up with Nieporent, who had already established Montrachet close by (which today trades most successfully as Bâtard). The relationship went on to lead to the considerable worldwide success of Nobu and although it has had more than its fair share of ups and downs, it played a particular role in putting this 25th birthday in perspective. In 1990 De Niro was already an established star so this new partnership attracted considerable and immediate media attention.

No sooner had Nieporent given me one of his trademark bear hugs at his party last week (he is one of the 20 individuals profiled in my book *The Art of The Restaurateur*) than he handed me a long article from *New York* magazine written by Meryl Gordon dated 9 April 1990.

Headed 'Grill Power – Robert De Niro Builds His Dream Restaurant', it is as fascinating for the photos – De Niro's face is unlined, Nieporent's hair and beard are jet black in a picture that works much better on our home page than above right - as for the facts it reveals. The risk they took in converting what had been the Martinson Coffee Building that De Niro had spotted for sale thanks to its proximity to his apartment seems normal today but was enormous then. And today the outdoor tables occupy the space where the trucks used to back into. The green tubes on the ceiling were the method of transferring invoices and despatch documents around the building in the era before email.

Although the initial budget looks extremely inexpensive by today's standards – \$2.8 million was the final figure raised from 23 investors, half for the freehold, half for the renovations – De Niro was turned down by, among others, Danny DeVito and Jeremy Irons with Barbara Streisand refusing once she heard that she would have to be fingerprinted for the alcohol licence. Mikhail

Baryshnikov and Christopher Walden were two of De Niro's friends who agreed to invest and must have been very pleased that they did so.

The figure may seem relatively small, particularly for a 13,500 sq ft building, but what ensued is regrettably a common feature of restaurant renovation: they went way over budget. To the tune of \$350,000 in fact, which in those days had the following consequences: Tribeca Grill would now have to gross \$1.2 million per year in sales with an average check of \$40 a head. These are also figures that may appear preposterously small today.

The restaurant has obviously managed to trade far more profitably than initially anticipated, with the exception of the aftermath of 9/11 when the kitchens provided meals for the police and fire fighters dealing with the consequences as these terrorist attacks hit buildings only 10 blocks away.

Several reasons for Tribeca Grill's continued success were immediately obvious as we stood at the increasingly crowded bar. The first is the large, dark wooden bar itself which occupies centre stage of the ground floor and which Nieporent bought at auction for US\$15,000 after Maxwell's Plum, a famous restaurant of yesteryear, closed its doors. Nieporent convinced De Niro that by placing this enormous bar in this unlikely location, it would break up the space, and would make it much easier for customers to spot the celebrities drawn by the De Niro association. The second obvious attraction is the series of black and white drawings around the room that are painted by Robert De Niro Senior, a well-known artist.

These paintings were pointed out to me by Tracy Nieporent, whose son Robert also now works in hospitality, although he is currently employed outside the family business. As Tracy rattled off the list of customers he had met over the years – John Kerry, the current Secretary of State when 'he was just a regular Senator' and fighters Joe Frazier and Sugar Ray Leonard - he revealed one of the rarely enunciated pleasures of life as a restaurateur. 'The greatest attraction of all is that the customers you meet come from all walks of life.'

Perhaps it is this strong family connection that has played such a role in the long life of Tribeca Grill, prompting the admirable staff retention and involvement that have obviously been key factors over the years.

Spare tables at the party were adorned with a leaflet fronted by a colourful painting by De Niro Snr. It listed 'Our family, past.....' with sections such as 'back of house', 'front of house', 'wine' and 'management' that named many of their longest-serving team members and where they had moved on to. These included a former front of house member who is now a playwright and a former member of the wine team who is now a filmmaker for [The Living Liquid](#). The back page included a list of 40 names from the same professions who are current staff and have been at the restaurant for 10 years or more.



In the large private dining room upstairs, one particularly popular corner was occupied by four Japanese chefs producing plates of delicious sushi diagonally opposite a vast 25th birthday cake made up of scores of cup cakes. At another large table were wines chosen by those who had worked as sommeliers or in the restaurant's wine service over the years. Daniel Johannes chose a Mâcon-Villages Clos Saint-Pancras, Chagnoleau 2014; Clare Shaheen a white St-Joseph 2013 from J L Chave and Jason Jacobeit a Garnacha Pinyolet Seleccion

Montsant 2011 - among a dozen wide-ranging wines.

The evening was fun and proof of one of the few irrefutable facts of restaurant lore: that to succeed as a restaurateur in looking after your customers, you must first look after your staff.

[Tribeca Grill](http://www.tribecagrill.com) 375 Greenwich Street, New York, NY 10013; tel +1 212 941 3900