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Restaurant News®

THE NEWS LEADER OF THE FOODSERVICE INDUSTRY • WWW.NRN.COM

PERIODICALS

VOL. 42, NO. 20

PUBLISHED EACH MONDAY • A LEBHAR-FRIEDMAN PUBLICATION • \$50.00

MAY 19, 2008



WEATHERING THE PERFECT STORM ECONOMY

**Operators
deploy new
strategies to
stay afloat amid
gales of inflation,
weakened sales**

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Hall of Fame**
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Tribeca Grill

New York City

BY ANDY BATTAGLIA

Robert De Niro asked. Nothing would seem to be so simple, but that's the reason echoed by those in the know for why Tribeca Grill struck them as a good idea at the start.

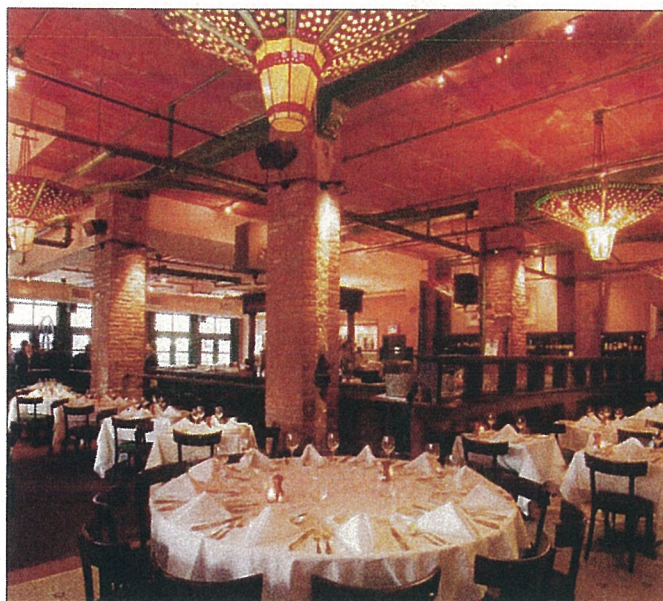
"It's hard to describe how Bob asks for things," says Bill Murray, with the kind of bemused laugh he made famous on "Saturday Night Live." "He's able to make it seem like he's on his hands and knees, even though you know he's not. He makes you feel like you're saving his life."

Drew Nieporent remembers his first meetings with De Niro in terms both more and less grand.

"He was Robert De Niro, at the height of his career," he says. "It was awesome."

Of course, there's more to the story behind Tribeca Grill. But it all began when De Niro approached Nieporent, then the operator of the feted downtown restaurant Montrachet, with an idea to start something different. De Niro had acquired a building in the same outpost neighborhood in a wild western expanse of lower Manhattan, with a plan to create a film center to lure the movie business back to New York.

"Every part of the building started with the restaurant and worked outward," Nieporent says. "He had visions for a cultural building full of producers, directors, casting people — you name it — who could congregate in a restaurant as a canteen, like they did on the West Coast. He didn't necessarily have a clear vision for what he



wanted to do, but I had a myriad of ideas, if you will, for restaurants at the time."

Their talks began in 1987, before Nieporent could lay claim to any of the other restaurants that now make up his Myriad Restaurant Group. The idea he had then was special for its homespun simplicity.

"I wanted this place to be an American restaurant," he says.

Along with its elemental menu and its inviting bar-and-grill atmosphere, Tribeca Grill owed part of its early renown to that particular American phenomenon known as the celebrity backer. Along with De Niro, investors in Tribeca Grill have included such stars as Bill Murray, Mikhail Baryshnikov, Sean Penn, Ed Harris, Lou Diamond Phillips, Russell Simmons, Peter Max, Christopher Walken, and Harvey and Bob Weinstein.

"All the hype and fanfare at the beginning could have crushed us," Nieporent says of Tribeca Grill's much-ballyhooed opening in 1990. "We were really shot out of a cannon. I still have letters from people at the start who said, 'We'll see you in a year — you'll be a flash in the pan.' But we worked through it. There was a lot of saying 'no' at the beginning because we didn't want to be trendy. We wanted to be around for a long time."

Now, into its 18th year, Tribeca Grill stands as an institution in a New York dining scene known to make meals of restaurants that open big and fizzle fast. Part of that longevity owes to a simple mission that stoked, especially in the beginning, a sort of bloodless revolution in downtown fine dining. As explained by longtime managing partner Marty Shapiro, the focus of Tribeca Grill has always been basic: "to put out really good, straightforward food in a relaxed setting where people can come and unwind." On the surface, that might have seemed to be at odds with what Nieporent was doing at the more intimate

and refined Montrachet. But it was really just a simple embrace of different values for a different restaurant with different aims.

"I used to go there when I used to work on Wall Street, and I loved Drew because he always made me look like a big shot in front of my girlfriends," says Joe Bastianich, reflecting on a time before he himself would become a celebrated New York restaurateur. "It's a milestone restaurant in New York. From that, a whole category of restaurants in the '90s, including many that I opened, were created with the parameters established for what that kind of dining could be about. It was a step away from the excessive, unnecessary formality of the '80s to food that was ingredient-driven, and an atmosphere where intelligence and hospitality became as much a part of the quotient as the culinary part of a dinner. Tribeca Grill really pioneered that."

A similar sense of warmth and approachability figures into the menu, as conceived by original chef Don Pintabona and later developed by current executive chef Stephen Lewandowski, only the second chef in Tribeca Grill's 18-year run. Lewandowski equates the philosophy of the menu with a devotion to food that is "intriguing but not intimidating."

"The whole restaurant really is just about consistent, solid, good food," he says, expressing as much excitement over a simple filet of beef with spinach and whipped (Continued on page 129)



Owner Drew Nieporent, above, and chef Stephen Lewandowski, left, say Tribeca Grill gets its staying power from a dedication to nontrendy food in a relaxed setting.

WEBSITE:

www.myriadrestaurantgroup.com/tribecagrill

PER-PERSON CHECK AVERAGE: \$65

BEST-SELLING DISH: arugula and buffalo mozzarella salad

SEATS: 200

AVERAGE WEEKLY COVERS: 3,000

CHEF: Stephen Lewandowski

OWNERS: Robert De Niro, Drew Nieporent, Marty Shapiro

MENU SAMPLER

Arugula and buffalo mozzarella salad with roasted sweet red and yellow peppers and grilled eggplant \$13

Sautéed jumbo lump crab cake with crispy shallots and truffled corn sauce \$19

Herb roasted free-range chicken with spring onion potato purée, glazed baby carrots and roasted garlic sauce \$25

Grilled Atlantic swordfish with fingerling potatoes, ramps and fiddlehead ferns, chanterelle vinaigrette \$29

Seared sea scallops with morels, asparagus, lardons and cauliflower mousse, truffle vinaigrette \$31

Chocolate, coconut and almond torte \$9

Warm cherry financier with mascarpone sorbet \$9

Tribeca Grill

(Continued from page 120)

potatoes as he does for octopus carpaccio or an unorthodox crab cake with truffle-infused corn sauce. "With this atmosphere, we can get Citicorp people coming in who just closed a big deal sitting there in suit and tie and drinking \$400 bottles of Cabernet, or some couple in town from Iowa in polo shirts and jeans who just wanted to come to Tribeca to eat. That's the beauty of it. With the food, we can have a lot of fun."

The same goes for the wine list, one of only five in New York to earn the Grand Award from Wine Spectator magazine. As important as acknowledging such distinctions, however, is making it known that the list developed organically, over time. At least according to wine director David Gordon, who takes care to point out: "This was never meant to be a wine destination. When we started, we had 60 wines. Then we built up little by little. Now we have 1,800."

Part of the reason for that is space. Situated in what used to be an old coffee warehouse, Tribeca Grill has an unusual capacity for storage, so much so that three wine cellars in the basement now store all 20,000-plus bottles of the collection, each one on the list plus stores of backups, all aging on site. It was down there that the list started to grow, first with a mind for American wines and now with a particular focus on the Rhone Valley.

"What makes this unique is that, even though we have so many wines, we really focus on areas that give value," Gordon says. "My interest was never to have a museum of wines that never sold, but instead to offer drinkable wines at a price point where our customers are comfortable spending. It was never an ego thing. We never cared about that."

The same could be said for many of the homey aspects that have contributed to Tribeca Grill's enduring presence over the years, from the paintings on the walls — all by Robert De Niro Sr., the noted painter and late father of the actor — to the coatroom that Bill Murray professes to adoring with a funny mock-seriousness that doubles as something disarmingly sincere.

"I really do like it there," Murray says. "So many restaurants in New York get tired and haggard and worn-out, but that place just keeps going, like a locomotive. There's something about drinking a bottle of champagne there that just feels good. It's a place for a real celebration."

Nieporent agrees, though with the more contemplative tone of a parent looking back on years receding into the past.

"I relate to all my restaurants as I would to kids," he says. "Each has its own personality and idiosyncrasies, and this one is very

warm. After we first opened and were so popular, we kind of felt like we hadn't really earned anything. It's much more gratifying to run this restaurant today, with the culmination of so much hard work. There's a lot of bedrock here. We laid a lot of brick." ■



The best-selling dish at Tribeca Grill is an arugula and buffalo mozzarella salad with roasted sweet red and yellow peppers and grilled eggplant.