

Rigueur, discipline, exigence!

DANIEL BOULUD AND ALAIN DUCASSE ARE TWO OF THE WORLD'S MOST CELEBRATED CHEFS. IN RECENT MONTHS, EACH HAS OPENED AN ACCLAIMED NEW RESTAURANT, BAR BOULUD, AND, FOR DUCASSE, ADOUR. AND EACH HAS MORE PANS ON THE FIRE. THIS SPRING, DUCASSE OPENS A NEW YORK BRANCH OF THE LEGENDARY PARISIAN BISTRO BENOIT, WHICH HE RECENTLY BOUGHT, AND LATER THIS YEAR BOULUD IS OPENING A BRASSERIE ON THE BOWERY. OVER BISON CARPACCIO AND SHAD ROE AT THE GRILL ROOM OF THE FOUR SEASONS, THEY REMINISCED ABOUT MEETING THIRTY YEARS AGO AND ALL THAT'S HAPPENED TO RESTAURANTS SINCE THEN.

BERGDORF GOODMAN: If I understand correctly, you both cooked at Moulin de Mougins, Roger Vergé's famous restaurant in the south of France, but not at the same time.

ALAIN DUCASSE: We knew each other among chefs, in the profession.

DANIEL BOULUD: There is a sort of fraternity among chefs, first among great chefs, but also among working cooks, going from one place to another. So I knew Alain was a tough one.

BG: Why do you say that?

DB: [laughs] He was extremely talented, but . . .

AD: It's a tough profession.

DB: He set very high expectations.

AD: In any profession, you want to be at the top. It requires a lot of discipline, rigor, of really pushing yourself. *Rigueur, discipline, exigence!* High standards and being very demanding. First of yourself, then of others.

BG: Where in France do you come from?



Alain Ducasse and Daniel Boulud

MACKENZIE STROH

DB: Alain comes from the Southwest, and I come from Lyon. Alain went to Lyon to learn about Lyonnaise cooking. He worked for Alain Chapel, who was one of the greatest chefs in the region. I went to the southwest of France, where he comes from, to understand his region, and worked at Michel Guérard, where he had also worked. It's a passion of chefs to travel, to learn from different masters, and to take inspiration.

AD: It's a profession that requires you to be curious about everything, to travel to different regions, to be inspired by the flavors of that place. Even with competition at global level now, it becomes even more important to dig back into your cultural memory, because there is so much history. You must have good, solid roots to compete.

DB: The roots are very, very true to Alain.

AD: It's all of the pieces that form the whole.

BG: It's necessary to stand on a foundation of what you know best.

AD: But our passion is to do something different every time.

DB: That can be a new dish. That can be for a new restaurant. That can be a new idea for the table setting. You constantly reassess and reinvent, and certainly sometimes also surprise. I mean, Alain does things that I would never expect somebody like him to do.

BG: You are different from some restaurateurs. You are not content with one restaurant.

AD: We're afraid to get bored. I'm past that stage where I want to have just one restaurant.

DB: You can do much more. And it would be a shame not to do it.

BG: Where did you two first meet? Do you remember?

DB: [laughs] I had a girlfriend, well, a friend. She was a very pretty Catalan.

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AD: Not beautiful. Pretty.

DB: [laughs]

AD: There's a difference!

DB: She was at [Moulin de Mougins, owned by] Roger Vergé. I was not working at Vergé then. I was waiting to come to America in two or three months, so I couldn't put myself into a restaurant, and for the time being I was working for this very famous Arab, Adnan Khashoggi, and his brother Nabil. It was a summertime job in Mougins. So, I was always hanging at the Moulin de Mougins every day, because I was bored in my little house, cooking by myself for a family and friends. So I met this particular Catalan and the week before I came to the U.S., my dream was to go to La Terrasse, the restaurant in the Hôtel Juana in Juan-les-Pins, because that was Alain's first season there. So I went to dinner there with my friend. I can still tell you the meal, because it was one of the best in my life. You were twenty-four-years old, I was twenty-five, and you blew me away. Everything was so fresh. Your ingredients came into the kitchen either still live or just in rigor mortis, so freshly cut. A perfect meal. And finished with some amazing ice cream, just out of the machine and so creamy. We still wonder what kind of system did you have to keep the ice cream so creamy.

BG: When another chef comes, do you try harder?

AD: We give a little more from the heart, with feeling, with sentiment. But all our guests are VIPs. Maybe we show a little more generosity. You don't go into this profession if you are not generous.

BG: When you left France to go to Washington to be the chef for the European Commission, did your fellow chefs think, why are you leaving paradise?

DB: No, I wanted to come to America. But Alain worked in America before me.

AD: Two months at Regine's in the winter of '76. All there was to eat in New York then was lobster, beef, chicken, onion rings and big beefsteak tomatoes.

BG: So Daniel, were you considered bold to leave France? To leave the temple for the provinces?

DB: No. I was young, and I thought I had maybe a couple of years where I could travel, and then go back home and start up my own business. Also, I think, when I came to New York after one year in Washington, I noticed there was a transformation going on in food in the U.S. Jean-Louis Paladin, when he came [to the Watergate in Washington] in '79, started to look for small suppliers, for farmers. Everything he had in France, he wanted to have it locally. He found even baby eel. In the Basque country, there is a region where the eel go up the river and spawn and then the baby eels go back into the sea, and they catch them there. And he convinced somebody that there will be baby eels in Maine in the rivers, and they found them. But it wasn't only Jean-Louis, because the American chef was starting to emerge and make a difference.

AD: Charlie Palmer.

DB: Charlie Palmer was working in La Côte Basque at that time. He was a young cook.

BG: Were you aware of Alice Waters?

AD: Oh, of course. But she was less integrated in our circle. It is Wolfgang [Puck] and

[Charlie] Trotter and Alice who initiated the food movement in America. It is they who made the difference.

DB: And in New York, you already had a protégé of Alice Waters, Jonathan Waxman at Jams. I felt then there was an opportunity to cook food as good as in France, and find good ingredients, and I always loved the energy of the young chefs and the customers. The passion here. So I never went back to France.

BG: Were you watching from France his career and saying, "Hmmm, interesting?"

AD: I chose to make my career in France, but I was observing him with lots of interest. I saw the quality of what he was doing.

DB: Alain was a great supporter when I was at Le Cirque.

AD: Daniel adapted to the lifestyle of New York. When he creates a restaurant, it's on a *fond*, a foundation, with strong roots. He never imposed, but proposed something that was right for New York without compromising his reputation.

DB: And I always stayed quite authentic. I always wanted to stay French. But France evolved as well. And Alain is the witness to the evolution of French cuisine. That does not mean he has to jump on it and do it too. You know what I mean? He doesn't have to follow every trend there is.

AD: We stay committed to the roots. It's to preserve your reputation as culinary professionals. We haven't followed fashion. We are convinced of the quality of what we do. We remain true to ourselves. When I do something in Tokyo, I do it my way. When Daniel does something in Miami, he will do it his way. There is also the necessity of adapting to the geography. But the important thing is to persist. For that you need interesting cuisine and solid roots.

DB: I still go on vacation in France in the summer, and I call Alain and say, "It would be nice if we can have dinner together." So once, I was in Avignon, Alain was in Monte Carlo, and we decided to go to Maison Pic [a great restaurant in Valence]. Alain always loved that restaurant, and I loved it too, so we decided to meet, and Alain being a man running at 120 miles an hour . . .

AD: 200!

DB: I'm sure he left Monte Carlo at 6:30 at night and a drive that would normally take two and a half hours he did in an hour and a half. He comes to Avignon; we have champagne; and off we go. We arrive there around 9:30 for a wonderful dinner. That's our friendship. To share a short moment, Alain didn't mind driving 200 miles.

BG: There comes a point when you both start doing very different and new things almost simultaneously. Isn't that true? Alain did Spoon . . .

DB: And there was DB Bistro, yes. Five years ago maybe.

BG: It's said that when you have a good idea, someone else is having that same idea at the same moment. Is it something that's in the air? Let's do something more casual?

DB: We know we are capable of making very wonderful food. But the challenge is to make it very good and accessible and consistent. The entire package is the same. It doesn't matter if it's a three-star restaurant in Paris or a four-star in New York. The integrity of the restaurant is the same, I think.

As with fashion, to succeed in the world, you always have to first succeed in New York. There is Europe, the U.S., and then the rest of the world. **AD**

AD: We have to be capable of working in different styles but still with the same care in each place. It's the same clients who come to our different places, so we have the obligation to please them when they go to our different restaurants for different reasons, whether they are in our fine dining restaurants or in our bistros. It's a family, and they move around from restaurant to restaurant.

DB: We share many common customers; they know the names of our waiters. They like to come on Thursday with us, they like to come on Tuesday with him. People have their habits.

BG: Daniel came to New York as an employee. Alain, you come to New York as the owner.

AD: Yes.

DB: He was already established. I was twenty-five-years old. I had to work it out!

AD: Daniel made his career in New York, and I made my career in France. It's easier to arrive as a young *commis*!

BG: You arrived in New York facing great expectations. It wasn't easy, right?

AD: *Oui*. Right.

DB: But Alain is very tenacious. He is convinced that New York is one of the greatest cities for food, and he is excited about cooking here.

AD: Mmm-hmm. And I did a favor for my colleagues in New York by raising prices. I made it easier for them to raise theirs. [*general laughter*]

DB: If anyone created the three-star model of Per Se, or Jean-Georges, or Bernardin, it was Alain, because nobody could pierce that ceiling.

BG: You mean the price of a meal?

DB: The price, yes. But the entire experience. To me, I am still below the ceiling. [*laughs*]

AD: I felt New York was a world capital that deserved a three-star restaurant too.

DB: As much as New York was a little snob and felt who is Alain to teach us, they also realized that, yes, in a way, he showed us what three-star style is.

AD: I took the punches for them. I took them for you too!

DB: Alain is the best you can get.

BG: He has tenacity.

DB: Yes. Because you have an attachment to New York. Maybe it was the two months he spent here thirty years ago, all the trips he made over time, all the charity dinners he came for, all that made him always feel that New York is his second home. Even before he opened his first restaurant, he was constantly coming to see Jean-Louis Paladin, coming to see me, coming to see friends, and he always had a relationship with his New York customers.

AD: As with fashion, to succeed in the world, you always have to first succeed in New York. There is Europe, the U.S., and then the rest of the world.

DB: I think he definitely belongs to New York now. We know we can't keep him here, but... [*laughs*]

BG: Adour, your new restaurant has some similarity with Daniel's Bar Boulud, no?

AD: No.

BG: But isn't it a restaurant where wine is very central?

AD: The focus on wine is very New York. But Daniel made Bar Boulud a little more casual.

BG: Isn't your plan for the new Benoit a more casual restaurant?

AD: It's a bistro.

DB: A little more contemporary, sort of urban bistro, but with a more modern approach. We'll see what happens. It's a legendary Paris bistro.

AD: New Yorkers told me they loved Benoit in Paris, so why not make one in New York? And I have a lot of affection for Jean-Jacques Rachou, so I said to him, why not make a Benoit on the site of La Côte Basque? It was an opportunity.

DB: I spent one time two months at Côte Basque in around 1981. I was so impressed by the power of the place! And Alain has so much affinity for Jean-Jacques. They are both from the southwest of France.

AD: There is so much history behind it.

BG: But restaurants can be fragile things. It's so hard to keep the same quality for twenty-five years. To see a restaurant that you love go down is so sad.

DB: They don't have the same cooking any more.

AD: The umbilical cord was cut.

DB: Of this sort of tradition. And Alain knows tradition and knows classic food. He can bring it back and make it maybe a little more clean, a little more up to date, but without losing the authenticity of it.

BG: For years, Italian food has been ascendant in New York. To find a good traditional French restaurant in New York is very difficult. There used to be one on every corner.

AD: That has happened everywhere, not just New York.

DB: That's because at many bistros, the food is so ordinary, so cheap. Bistro does not mean the food is good. And it's the same with Italian. Italian is synonymous with affordable, casual, but that does not mean there are many great chefs doing the right stuff. The menus are very generous but predictable. People like Mario [Batali] and other young chefs are doing an amazing job, because they're digging down into regional cooking, authenticity. It's the same with the French bistros. The percentage of the ones that are authentically good is not that big yet.

BG: Now there's an opportunity in New York to reinvent the French restaurant . . .

AD: We're trying to bring it back. That's what I'm going to do.

DB: Absolutely.

AD: Otherwise, we'll do Italian. [*laughter*] At the end of the day, I want to make sure that if I do something, it's for the pleasure of my customers, and if I do the right thing for them, that's going to do all the right things for me. It's not easy. We practice our trade to please ourselves, selfishly, and if you're lucky, it pleases the clients and business is good. We have the passion and conviction that we are doing the right thing. That's the quality of our cooking. And every day we try to do more and better than before. **BG**

THE BG CONVERSATIONS ARE CONDUCTED AND EDITED BY MICHAEL GROSS.