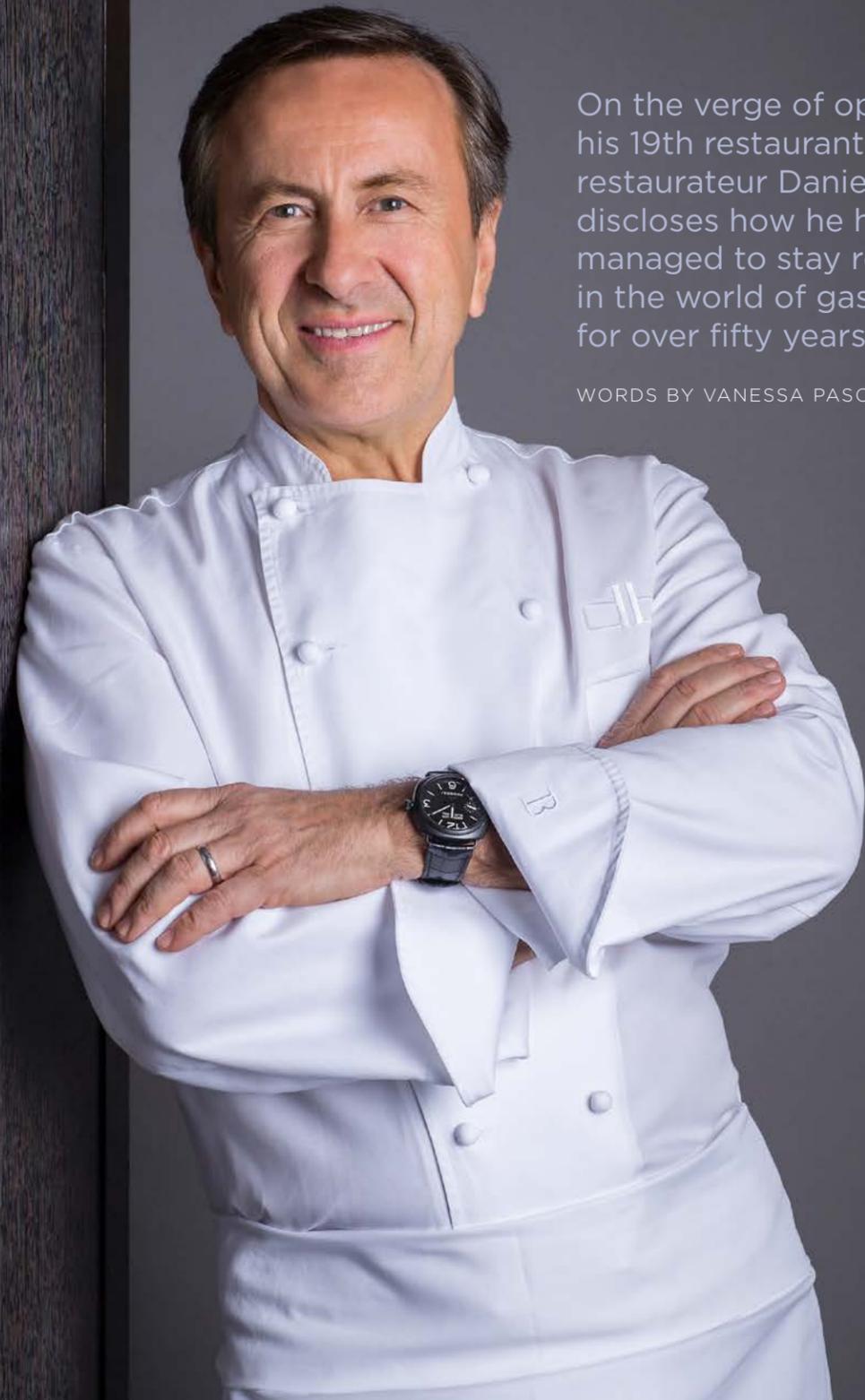


HOW A CULINARY ICON IS MADE



On the verge of opening his 19th restaurant, chef-restaurateur Daniel Boulud discloses how he has managed to stay relevant in the world of gastronomy for over fifty years

WORDS BY VANESSA PASCALE

“From a very young age, my day off, I will be traveling all around. Like, I was working outside of Lyon [France] and I would be driving miles just to eat frog legs from that lady who was making frog legs or the other direction and eat escargots or eat particular lamb,” says Chef Daniel Boulud in a thick French accent. “Because in France, they were really regional speciality and restaurant who made their fortune and their reputation on one ingredient.” He laughs. “People will drive to just go and have that. To me, it’s what food is about.” Yes, Daniel has been a foodie all his life.

Daniel’s affinity for extraordinary fare coupled with his coveted apprenticeships at Michelin-starred restaurants have garnered him a number of impressive culinary awards, including, six career James Beard Awards; three Michelin stars; Lifetime Achievement Award - World’s 50 Best Restaurants (2015); and *Elite Traveler’s* prestigious Lifetime Achievement Award (2018)— and a collection of incredibly-successful restaurants. For over fifty years, Daniel has proved to be a master of the culinary arts, yet, he shows no sign of slowing down—in fact, he’s opening his 19th restaurant this year.

It’s a chilly afternoon in November. Daniel and I are seated across from one another in a booth within the “skybox,” his intimate office which overlooks the kitchen of his two-Michelin star restaurant, DANIEL (ranked in *Elite Traveler’s* Top 100 Restaurants in the World). On the table between us, a pot of tea steeps. To my surprise, Daniel, who is dressed in a traditional white double-breasted chef’s jacket embroidered with his initials, is holding a printed out page of notes on me, pulled from the internet. He pours me a cup of hot tea, which I fervently relish (the room is quite cold), almost as much as the stories he shares with me during our hour-long conversation

The French chef-turned-restaurateur has restaurants all over the world—in London, Singapore, Toronto, Montréal, Washington, D.C.,

Boston, New York City, Palm Beach, and Miami. In Miami for over twelve years now, his first restaurant here was French eatery, DB Bistro. “But we didn’t have Boulud Sud at the time. After Boulud Sud opened here in New York, we felt that Mediterranean cuisine was definitely a connection with Miami and the lifestyle there, so we did Boulud Sud.” Situated downtown, inside of JW Marriott Marquis Miami, Boulud Sud serves up the freshest, most delicious Mediterranean fare along with exceptional service. Their noteworthy dishes include, Mediterranean Sea Bass “En Papillote,” Octopus à la Plancha, and Grapefruit Givré. “The location is definitely getting better. Now it’s almost finished, the theater across the street, Whole Foods next door, all the condominium. There’s the Aston Martin Tower going across the street and all that. Finally, it’s turning into its own little neighborhood. We’re not so lonely, so it’s nice.”

Daniel travels to South Florida often for events and to visit his restaurants, Café Boulud and Boulud Sud. He was recently in Miami during Art Basel to cook for a few events with Brazilian artist, Vik Muniz and an affair at the Miami Beach Botanical Garden. He plans to return for The Food Network & Cooking Channel South Beach Wine & Food Festival this month. “Hopefully, Miami keeps growing, we hope to grow there, too.” Every December, Daniel’s Palm Beach restaurant, Café Boulud, hosts a sold-out black and white truffle dinner attended by regulars and foodies alike. “We do two-course with white

truffle. Two-course with black truffle... I even make baked potatoes, crushed potatoes with black truffle. Bake a whole potato and I crush it with olive oil, butter, and truffles and then put it back in and cover it with truffles, that’s a dish, I think, I have it here.” He pulls a cookbook from his bookshelf and flips through it. “I did this cookbook when I was the [executive] chef at Le Cirque [where he honed his culinary skills from 1986-1992] like, thirty years ago.” His baked potato with truffle became all the rage. “Voilà!” He points to the recipe.

“The people who come to the truffle dinner, they are very open-minded and they just like to make sure that there is some real cooking going on around truffle,” says Daniel, who at the time of our interview planned to serve a tartare of langoustine with white truffle, a black truffle and partridge consommé, a ravioli of sweetbread and truffle and braised tongue and cheek. “The foodies are always looking for an opportunity to have an experience... You can go to the theater or the ballet or the opera in Palm Beach every day, so at least there is one more entertaining evening for everyone there. I love truffle, caviar, champagne,” he says with a smile. “People love truffle... Once in awhile you have to make yourself a good indulgence.”

The legendary chef plans to open a new restaurant at One Vanderbilt in Midtown Manhattan this year. “This is a wonderful opportunity to partner with one of the best developers in town and they have built what will become, I’m sure, an iconic building in New York City: One Vanderbilt. The building is, I think, taller than the Empire State Building by a few feet. I guess it’s a question of how big the needle is,” he says with a laugh. Near Grand Central Station, his second-floor restaurant will be the only restaurant inside the modern office building. “I really love the building, love the location, love the new restaurant. It’s sort of a forward design compared to all my restaurants,” Daniel tells me. The restaurant will feature a sophisticated garden of greenery to bring nature indoors, a fantastic bar... “Something very different than what I’ve done. We want to create an homage to the great places in New York.” Daniel shows me a few renderings of the space on his phone. “The restaurant will be French, but subtly more contemporary...with a certain focus on ingredients, the season, lightness, health. I’m not opening a spa,” he says with a smile, “but at the same time, I like the food to feel healthy. I mean, the food I like to eat as well, it’s very important.”



CAFÉ BOULUD PALM BEACH - PHOTO CREDIT: NOAH FECKS

Daniel already has 18 restaurants worldwide, with the majority (ten) of them based in New York City, where he lives, including DANIEL, The Bar at Daniel, Bar Boulud, Boulud Sud, Café Boulud, Bar Pleiades, DB Bistro Moderne, and three locations of Épicerie Boulud. He tells me that many of his New York customers seek out his other restaurants when they travel. "It's good. Of course, there's always the newcomer, the new this, the new that, it's natural that if you do well, other people are going to want to do something next to you, something new. But it's OK, competition is stimulating."

With so many restaurants, how do you do it? Do you frequent them often? "I frequent them during the day. I frequent them at night. It's a teamwork... The chef cannot do everything himself. He's going to need his team of chefs with him. He's going to need a team at the front of the house to back him up and all that. I've been mentoring a lot of young chefs, a lot of front of the house waiters, managers, and sommeliers, and while we give opportunity to many to grow with us, some of them also have

opened their own business and leave town and move on and are quite successful. And we also keep many in-house and we give them the opportunity to grow with us as well. There is definitely a lot of imprint of Daniel Boulud and the cuisine that I want, but then we work very closely with a chef... If it's a young chef, who hasn't worked long with me, for sure, we watch him closely. If it's a chef who has a lot of experience with us, he has the freedom and the responsibility to make that restaurant work. You really try to adapt based on what the brand is. So, if it's a Bar Boulud, it's not Café Boulud, it's not DANIEL."

Now that you're a prolific restaurateur, how often are you in the kitchen? "I'm here right now. I can see what they're doing right now," he says matter-of-factly. But are you cooking? "I don't need to cook, but I need to taste. I need to know what's going on, and I cook sometimes. I cook more when I travel than when I'm in New York, but that does not mean we don't cook together. During the preparation, if they have any questions, they can always get to

me, usually the recipe I established, the chef... There is an entire pyramid of management who supervise everybody, so I think the success of a restaurant is due to the success of the team."

When you're home, do you cook? "Yeah, simple. One pot meal. Depends who I'm entertaining and where I'm cooking. I live right above the store here, DANIEL, so it's easy to cook, even if I have a New York kitchen." He smiles. "When I go in the countryside, I like to cook barbeque. I like to cook things I don't always cook at home." Because Daniel has young children, he likes to prepare dishes that please the household. "You'd be surprised, and it might be the same food you do at home." He laughs. "People should not think that chef always make fancy food. Chef like to just eat spaghetti tomato sauce as well. It's easy to do. You put the can of tomato..." He chuckles. "But I have good tomato sauce at home. Some good spaghetti." He adds that the source of your ingredients is essential. "My wife only buys organic vegetables, organic this and that. Everything. We cook simple at home, but we cook healthy."

You have been in the food industry for so long and have achieved so much, what have you taken away from your experiences as a chef? "Well, the good thing or the bad thing with the business, is that they won't let you rest," he laughs. "So you can't take for granted whatever you earn and you have to look forward to the next. It's not about trying to stack up the achievement or the rewards, it's more about how much we enjoy this business and if you're doing it, it better be fun and make people happy with it. Make our staff happy with the work we offer them. It has to be inspiring to our team, to me, and to our customers."

Loyalty and trust does not come as easily as it supposedly once did, which makes Daniel question whether millennials can be loyal the way their parents or grandparents were to restaurants and other things. "People used to go on vacation in the same place all their life. Now, people have to change places every time they go somewhere," he laughs. "It's very different... You go to the same place in Europe, Italy, France, it don't matter if you live in Rome or in a small village, you will go to the same butcher, the same cheesemonger, you will go to the same person who will provide you what make you feel good, what make you happy, and the relationship you have with them and all that. I think today, the young generation have to learn, while there's a lot of distractions in the world, you have to have a rhythm of consistency in your life and also a trust... We constantly work very hard at earning trust."

Scroll through Daniel's Instagram page and you will realize how much he loves to give back to the community. Daniel tells me that when he began his culinary career in Lyon, France that they had about a dozen bums visit the restaurant he worked at throughout the day, and they would serve them a meal at the back door of the kitchen. Being in New York, he feels that there are so many opportunities to be charitable. "For me, Citymeals on Wheels was the one who is connected to the community; it has been feeding elderly people. In Europe, you take care of your grandmother, you take care of your parents, you take care of everybody. Here, many of them, nobody takes care of them. So, Citymeals on Wheels at least takes care of the elderly, which is very good and it's one I focus on. They serve 18,000 meals every day, and with that warm meal comes a smile, a hello, a connection. There's a lot of volunteers who have a list of people to call every week and talk to them. Talk about nothing, talk about the weather, politics, whatever you want, but keep them active, busy... They have more than 120 people over 100 years old. Citymeals does some good to keep them healthy and alive," says Daniel passionately.



BOULUD SUD

What dishes are you most known for?

"I don't make those dishes here anymore. The thing is, you almost want to open a restaurant where you put all your specialties in it, so this way, you don't change those recipes ever," he laughs. "For example, there's a dish I created thirty years ago and they are still relevant, they are still famous. If you say to a chef, 'Who did the Sea Scallop Black Tie?' They'll say, 'Daniel Boulud.' 'Who did the paupiette sea bass?' 'Boulud.' They are dishes I carry in restaurant DANIEL for quite awhile. And now, the Sea Scallop Black Tie, we only do it New Year's Eve, around that holiday season. And the sea bass on a bed of leeks, which was basically a dish made of three ingredients [fresh thyme, Idaho potatoes, and butter], that's the dish that will get the most famous, the one with the least ingredients often. The sea bass, you can have at Café Boulud, still served there. The dish was born in '86 so," he laughs, "33 years old the dish is, and it's still relevant. People go and still enjoy it. It was a riot here when the chef decided that we should not cook the sea bass here [DANIEL] anymore, because they felt we were selling too much of it. And that's not good. And I say, 'Yes, you're right, this is not good. Too many people want it,'" he laughs. "You want to attract new customers with new things. And you attract new customers with old dishes, but we felt that we had more to show. So we have created many different dishes since. But that's why we make cookbooks [he has nine], so we can put them in. So they go into the garage," he says with a laugh.



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Daniel has been hosting Power Lunch for Women at DANIEL for twenty-two years now to benefit Citymeals on Wheels. Last year, the event raised more than \$1.2 million to fund the preparation and delivery of over 150,000 meals for the homebound elderly. “It’s 400 women who pay \$1,000 to be at the lunch gala and men pay \$10,000 to be with the ladies. You have people from all over —fashion, entertainment, media, and business. People who just support Citymeals, so I think that’s a very positive thing in New York, to be a part of something that makes a difference every day in a way.”

All year long, Daniel participates in charities that benefit children, health, education, including Ment’or, a leading nonprofit organization devoted to inspiring culinary excellence in young professionals and preserving the traditions and quality of cuisine in America. “Ment’or

is a foundation we created for young chefs, where when you do a craft and you work for someone it’s not easy to get a break. You have a job. Unless you quit, you might not be able to see other things. Yeah, you can see on Instagram, you can see on [the] internet, on TV, other opportunity to discover other restaurant, but I think with Ment’or, we want to make sure that we have young chefs having a continuing education while they’re working for someone and they don’t have to quit their job.” Ment’or provides hundreds of grants to young, up-and-coming chefs, so that they can gain experience in any restaurant in the world and have the opportunity to work with leading chefs. “They can’t afford to leave their job for three months because they have to pay [for] their apartment, they have to continue to earn their salary. So we cover them... We cover everything... so that is very valuable for [a] young chef.”

Even as a chef’s apprentice, you demonstrated culinary excellence and were the recipient of awards quite early on, do you think your talent is inherent? “No,” he laughs. “I don’t know, but I like the competitive side of business, but I don’t do it for the sake of winning awards. It’s not like swimming,” he laughs, “you’ve gotta make a living out of this business. Awards are important, but that does not mean... I have friends who sometimes earn a lot of awards, but do they keep their business relevant? Not always easy.” How do you stay relevant? “We’ll open One Vanderbilt, that keeps you relevant. I think what keeps you relevant in our business is the youth coming into the business, and how much we are motivated teaching and growing talent in the business. We have 850 employees in New York, and of that, I will say that 70% are people 30 years old. So it’s good, that keeps you relevant. I’m a French chef, and I’m not going to cook Chinese tomorrow for the sake of trying to stay relevant because Chinese is fashionable today. But you definitely get inspired by, not the globalization of food, but definitely by the ethnicity of cuisine and you get inspired the way every country borrows inspiration from others.”

The week of our interview, Daniel received the news that his restaurants were ranked highly on *Zagat*. “Before the internet, before the World’s 50, before many other things, there was the *Zagat* guide; I think they’re celebrating their 40-year anniversary this year.” He enlightens me with a little history about its creator, Tim Zagat. “*Zagat* guide is back; we are very excited. We have the most popular restaurant. We have four [restaurants] in the Top 20 out of 50. We have 4 in the Top 25. I think we have DANIEL #4 or 5. And then we have Café Boulud #10. We have Bar Boulud #24, 25? Boulud Sud #15 in New York. To me, *Zagat* is the quintessential New Yorker guide... We’re very very proud of that.” While it’s a great honor to be recognized by a respected critic, like *Zagat*, it’s even more validating when you’re recognized by the people. Daniel tells me that Tripadvisor listed DANIEL as #1 for Best Restaurants (Fine Dining) in the U.S. “For what it’s worth, at least we can say it wasn’t politically set up.” He lets out a laugh. “So that’s what I think I take more pride in, knowing it’s something we didn’t politically work hard at trying to get. After 26 years in business and more than 30 years in New York, how do you stay relevant? By still hitting the marks,” he says with a big grin. “That’s what’s important, Voilà!” ML

Keep up with Daniel on Instagram and Twitter:

@DanielBoulud;

Facebook: @ChefDanielBoulud;
and <https://www.danielboulud.com/>.



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