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A Classic Reinvented

Major Food Group turns the former Four Seasons into New York's hottest restaurants

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When the iconic Four Seasons restaurant closed in 2016, New York wondered what would come next. When word got out that the new operators were a trio of 30-something upstarts, skepticism ran high. Once the new venues opened earlier this year, however, the verdict was in: Major Food Group had created something special.

In retrospect, the project seems perfectly planned. But it was born on a wing and a prayer. Sipping his coffee one February morning in 2014, Jeff Zalaznick looked up from the newspaper he was reading.

"Listen to this," he said to chef Mario Carbone, one of his two business partners. "There's a rumor that Aby Rosen is not going to renew the Four Seasons' lease. Can you believe it?"

They looked at each other. Carbone knew what Zalaznick was thinking. "I'll ask Rich," he said. When he got a thumbs-up from their third partner, chef Rich Torrisi, Zalaznick wrote an email to Rosen, whose real estate firm, RFR Holding, co-owned by Michael Fuchs, owns the Seagram Building, where the Four Seasons was located.

RFR also owns the landmarked Lever House, just across Park Avenue, home to the sleek Casa Lever restaurant, and the Gramercy Park Hotel, with its Rose Bar. Additionally, the firm is the landlord of Soho's 11 Howard and its hot nightclub, the Blond. Rosen, 57, has accumulated more than 800 works of modern art, and draws his social circle from New York's A-list.

Zalaznick had Rosen's email address because the financier was a regular customer at Carbone, their biggest success. Opened in 2013, the restaurant combines pastas and hearty main dishes with friendly, retro service and a serious wine list, making it the West Village flagship of Major Food Group, the team's thriving collection of New York restaurants.

"We said to Jeff, 'Go get it,'" Carbone recalls. "We wanted it. This was Madison Square Garden. The top, the most storied restaurant in New York history. You want that shot."

"The Four Seasons," Zalaznick wrote Rosen. "We want it."

Rosen wrote back, "Let's talk."

Three years and \$30 million later, they have reason to celebrate.

Opened in 1959 in the Seagram Building at Park Avenue and 52nd Street, the Four Seasons was about as iconic as restaurants get. Architect Philip Johnson's landmarked interior in a Ludwig Mies van der Rohe building connected two spacious, high-ceilinged dining rooms, each with its own distinctive look—the Grill Room, all wood panels and contemporary sculptural pieces, and the Pool Room, which set its tables around a shimmering pool bordered in white marble.

James Beard consulted on the restaurant's early menus, which evoked fancy dinner parties of the era. Beef Stroganoff prepared tableside was the signature dish, and sweet-and-sour pike in tarragon aspic was an off-the-menu "insider" choice. Baby carrots grown in Oregon and cooked in butter were a vegetable perennial.

The dishes were creative. "Bouillabaisse salad" deconstructed the ingredients for the famous southern French soup into a chilled entrée. A glaze made from calamondin (a tart, piquant citrus fruit) adorned "Amish ham steak." A crab and sweet pepper appetizer nestled into a tall glass was christened "crab julep."

But the restaurant, the creation of Restaurant Associates and its impresario, Joe Baum, could not sustain a profit. Even George Lang, who would go on to create Café des Artistes off Central Park and revive the classic Gundel in Budapest, could not stem the flow of red ink.

The arrival in 1973 of Paul Kovi and Tom Margittai turned things around. The two Hungarians, both with experience running hotels, bought the lease for \$15,000 after Seagram took on Restaurant Associates' debt. They pitched the restaurant to up-and-coming business professionals, especially women, media executives and food and wine professionals.

Kovi and Margittai made the Four Seasons the place for important wine events. Demand far exceeded the 200-plus seats for the annual California Barrel Tasting, a smash hit from 1976 to 1985, a time when the best restaurants almost universally disparaged U.S. wines. It turned out to be a watershed for California wine on the East Coast. Other events included an introduction to the newest vintages from Bordeaux, and an annual Champagne luncheon.

Where the same menu had been served in the Pool Room and the Grill Room, Kovi and Margittai introduced a simpler Grill menu at lunch that featured broiled shrimp, poached salmon, grilled meats and stir-fried vegetables. They also served a spa menu—the first in a prominent U.S. restaurant. These innovations drew a younger generation of New York's movers and shakers.

These shorter, more healthful midday repasts, in the meeting place of so many familiar faces, got a name: the power lunch. First seen in a 1977 New York Times article, the term entered the national consciousness two years later in an Esquire spread ("*America's Most Powerful Lunch*") that included a seating chart of who sat where in the Four Seasons Grill Room.

In 1995, ready to retire, Kovi and Margittai sold their majority interest, with Julian Niccolini, their ebullient front-of-the-house host, and Alex von Bidder, who had built a lucrative business for the restaurant's private functions, continuing to run the operation. The Four Seasons rolled on, year after year.

Through RFR, Rosen invested in the Seagram building in 2000 and gained sole control in 2013. By then, the restaurant's signature chainmail curtains were falling apart. The wood panels needed care. The Four Seasons' cutting-edge days were long past.

Rosen thought it was out of touch with modern restaurantgoers, and in 2014, he informed Niccolini and von Bidder that he would not renew the lease. "Dinosaurs get neglected, and they disappear," Rosen says. The Four Seasons closed in 2016 in a flurry of goodbye parties and starry charity events. (Niccolini and von Bidder have retained the rights to the name and are building a new Four Seasons two blocks south on Park Avenue, opening in 2018. For more on their venture, see "A New Season".) To create something new, in 2015, Rosen chose Carbone, Torrisi and Zalaznick.

Their New York fans cheered. The rest of the world asked, "Who?"

Rosen knew what he wanted. "If you knock out the Four Seasons, you better have something great to replace it," he says. "I was impressed with the deep knowledge they bring to the table." He sees the Major Food guys as "young, hungry and smart." He liked their business sense and willingness to honor the history of the space.

Between forming the partnership in 2011 and opening the Grill and the Pool this year, the group had already created a portfolio of 11 other restaurants, mostly in and around Greenwich Village, Soho and the Lower East Side, plus Las Vegas and Hong Kong for two outposts of Carbone. Their empire ranged from a 30-seat casual Italian joint specializing in chicken Parmesan sandwiches to a speakeasylike cocktail-and-raw-seafood jewel. (For more on Major Food Group.)

Major Food and Rosen share the partnership 50-50. "We own it together," Rosen says. "I was in charge of restoration and renovation of the premises, and they are the food and restaurateurs."

There are also 100 minority partners, "some of the old-timers and the new-timers-hedge fund guys, artists, CEOs, leaders," Rosen says. This not only raised the \$30 million needed for restoration and all the things necessary to fashion a new restaurant, it created instant loyalty. "Those 100 people will bring another 20 people each to the restaurant," he adds, "and we have a basis for a new demographic."

Although the Four Seasons' original landmarked interior could not be changed, it needed all-new furnishings. Niccolini and von Bidder sold off the furniture at auction when they left.

Major Food insisted on one big change, however. "We knew we had to turn this into two different restaurants," Zalaznick says. "Different menus, different kitchens, different people."

The contrast in the ambience of the two spaces, a factor since the Four Seasons opened in 1959, underlines why these rooms work better as two separate restaurants.

Customers enter from 52nd Street, through a marble reception area that serves both restaurants. Up the stairs, the Grill vibrates with activity: a crowded bar, an army of service carts, and diners creating a din as they dig into slabs of meat. Shimmering floor-to-ceiling chain curtains, rosewood walls, bronze fittings and sculptures were designed specifically for the space. Carbone runs the kitchen.

At the Pool, reached through a passageway past a floor-to-ceiling hydroponic wall garden by artist Paula Hayes, the decibel level drops and things move more gracefully, though the music in the Lounge can be lively verging on distracting. A glassed-in wine cellar holds a collection of Château d'Yquem back to 1811. An Alexander Calder mobile above the pool and a blue-and-green color scheme create a more relaxed atmosphere for Torrisi's seafood-centric menu.

The Grill, meant to evoke a 1950s-era Midtown New York chop house, opened in early May. Many reviews have been enthusiastic. "The Grill is confident, theatrical, retro, unsentimental, sharp and New Yorky," wrote Pete Wells in the *New York Times*. "It was always one of the most beautiful dining rooms in New York. Now it's also one of its most exciting restaurants." Wells rated the restaurant three stars out of a maximum four.

Other critics were less exuberant, focusing on what they consider high prices and an excessively rarefied environment. But the place is already crowded, from cocktail hour until late at night, when the last desserts are cleared.

On my visits, Carbone's kitchen at the Grill coaxed vivid flavors and winning textures out of every dish, especially those that expand a standard chop-house menu beyond meat and potatoes. The hits include delicate pasta à la presse, thin, at pasta infused with pressed juices from roast duck and other poultry (already a signature dish); lamb chops brushed with a tantalizingly aromatic curry oil; and rich, minerally prime rib, garnished with a savory-seasoned beef bone. These dishes can stand next to fare from any of the trendy chef-driven steak houses around the nation.

A visit to the Pool shortly after it opened started in its intimate new bar. Repurposed from what was once an anonymous private dining area, the Pool Lounge offers inventive choices from a page of fruit-forward cocktails. Despite minor confusion with service, the meal was subtle and satisfying. A whole Portuguese turbot fillet emerged from a simple sauté with classic savoriness and velvety texture.

Stephanie Prida, former pastry chef of Manresa in California, won't be a secret in New York for long if she keeps making mind-altering desserts that split the difference between sweet and savory, like her chocolate custard with *cupuaçu*, a fruit from the Amazon that hints at cacao and pineapple.

Wine played a key role at the Four Seasons from the beginning. In Craig Claiborne's 1959 *New York Times* review of the brand-new restaurant, although he complained about a lack of French refinement in the food, he lauded the wine list, ranking it among the best in the city. "It is almost pointless to cite a few wines of the many," Claiborne wrote. "The average cost for an excellent Burgundy or Bordeaux of recent vintage is about \$7. Excellent domestic wines are available at \$3.50 a bottle."

Founder Joe Baum insisted on pricing wine reasonably enough for customers to have a good time without overspending, a policy he would carry over to later restaurants such as Windows on the World in the World Trade Center and the Rainbow Room in Rockefeller Center. After Baum moved on, though, the wine prices eventually matched the luxury tariff for the food.

Major Food built a strong wine program out of the gate. The 2,500-selection list, shared by the Grill and the Pool, is overseen by wine director John Slover, whose résumé includes a sommelier stint at Cru when it won a series of *Wine Spectator* Grand Awards in the 2000s. He was consulting for collectors when Zalaznick called.

"I had retired from restaurants," Slover says. "Running around the floor and the cellar every night is for younger people. Of course I was missing it. I thought nothing would bring me back."

The location's cultural resonance sold him. "This is maybe the most significant restaurant in American history," he says. "Just to be in these beautiful rooms feels so good. To work with Jeff and two absolutely world-class chefs, I couldn't pass this up."

The list showcases Old World classics and cult wines from California, focusing on Champagne, Burgundy, Bordeaux, the Rhône, Piedmont, Tuscany and Napa Valley. Slover estimates that half the tables ask advice on what to drink. Unfortunately, customers are handed a heavy, unwieldy, oversized book that doesn't lie flat and is difficult to read in the dimly lit Pool.

Slover has been surprised by the demand for young Bordeaux, older Burgundy and big California Cabs. "I'm now locked into an eternal hunt for Bordeaux," Slover says. "And it's shocking to me how many bottles of Continuum and Scarecrow [we sell]," he adds, noting two California collectibles. "Happy though I am to take the \$1,800 for a bottle of Scarecrow, there's an internal monologue. I want to have lots of good options at less astronomical levels."

More affordable gems include wines from coastal Italy, Spain and southern France at the Pool. Lambruschi Vermentino Costa Marina 2014 (\$120), a saline and savory Ligurian white, was refreshing with a variety of shell and vegetable dishes. At the Grill, a plummy, ripe, focused Domaine de Terrebrune Bandol 2010 (\$100) drank well with the prime rib. Slover and his four sommeliers like the surprised smiles these lesser-known wines get. About 150 selections are priced at less than \$100.

Storage can handle 15,000 bottles, including the 1,000 on display in the Yquem corner by the entrance to the Pool. This nectar is sold largely by the glass. The dessert menu lists six vintages of the great Sauternes, back to 1991, at \$95 to \$150 by the glass.

The Yquems were Zalaznick's idea. One of the minority partners offered his jaw-dropping collection, which spans more than 150 years. Maintaining that collection, and the verticals of other wines on the list, falls to Slover, who notes, "I have a lot of long relationships with collectors."

Both Carbone, 37, and Torrisi, 38, grew up in Italian-American families, attended the Culinary Institute of America and cut their teeth in some of New York's blue-chip kitchens. These early experiences had a lot to do with the kind of restaurants they came together to do.

Carbone landed an internship at Babbo shortly after it opened in 1998, working for Mario Batali as he was starting his company. "Literally, he was the one training me," Carbone smiles. "He became my first mentor." Carbone was on the team that opened Lupa, Batali's Roman trattoria, on the same block where Carbone's namesake restaurant would open more than a decade later.

Carbone and Torrisi actually worked together for a time at Café Boulud and stayed in touch as Carbone honed his craft at WD-50 and Del Posto, Torrisi at Aquavit and A Voce. Torrisi needed a place to stay temporarily in 2007 and moved in with Carbone, whose roommate had just moved out. During their downtime, they batted around concepts for restaurants each might create individually.

Torrisi had an idea for a casual deli that could morph into a chef-inspired dinner club by night. "We thought it was something he could do after we both became fancy Midtown chefs," Carbone says. When the financial crisis hit in 2008, "There was no money out there to do a full-scale restaurant. Rich said, 'Why don't I just do the deli thing?' I said, 'What if I helped you?' He had family money saved up, my family had some money, and we did it together."

On Dec. 30, 2009, in a tiny space on Mulberry Street, Torrisi Italian Specialties opened its doors, serving sandwiches and coffee by day. In March 2010, they added a no-reservations, four-course prix fixe dinner service for 18 guests. Word spread fast among foodies, who clamored to sample what

eventually became a 10-course tasting menu that might include melon acqua pazza, sweet corn arancini, salmon cannelloni and barbecued duck with watermelon.

Zalaznick, 33, a former investment banker at J.P. Morgan, became a regular at these dinners. He liked the way the chefs combined a careful approach to the food and style of a special era with a sense of 21st-century fun. In 2011, when they approached him about a partnership, he enthusiastically agreed.

It took three years to settle into a way of working together, mixing the chefs' very different preferences with Zalaznick's style; all three agree he is much more than the guy who handles the business end.

"People think Jeff's just the money guy, but that's only one percent of what he does in this company," Carbone says. "He's the palate. He tastes everything we make, and when he says it's good, it's done, more so than when Rich and I taste each other's work. It has to go through Jeff. We may be the quote-unquote artists, but he's the one who positions us to take best advantage of that moment, or that situation, or that dish."

Left to their own devices, Carbone and Torrisi take different approaches to food. Carbone loves old-school Italian and reveled in reviving its glory at his self-named restaurant, diligently perfecting ideas and making it consistent. "My food is nostalgic," he says. "I start with something old." Torrisi's style is lighter, more experimental, more seasonal. "I have to try ve different ideas," Torrisi says, "even if only half of them will make things better."

Carbone puts it this way: "Rich has real skill, and I am much more of a grandma kind of cook."

Zalaznick is the wrangler who brings it all together. When they teamed with him, their goal was simply to keep Torrisi Italian Specialties alive, "to make sure we didn't have to work for someone else," Carbone laughs. They did not suspect they would someday be on a stage that the whole food world was watching.

In many ways, these new ventures turn the food world on its head. Nearly all new openings today aim for a casual vibe and value, even those from ambitious chefs. "Hot new restaurant" lists around the U.S. generally feature smartly designed casual places with creative food. Few combine classic architecture with attentive service and a substantial wine list. The luxury surroundings, well-staffed service, ambitious food, deep wine cellar and unabashedly steep prices of the Grill and the Pool stand out starkly.

Likewise, few big-name toques build their signature restaurants' menus on the traditional à la carte model. The ones that make the biggest impression among food insiders specialize in multicourse menus consisting of up to two dozen servings of a few bites each.

That sea change came about when in-demand chefs realized that their most enthusiastic patrons passed up the main menu for the chef's evening-long "tasting" menu. Originally, these series of small plates offered highlights from the regular menu and a few special bites, but now they've taken on a life of their own at places like the French Laundry in Napa Valley, Alinea in Chicago and virtually all of the world's most celebrated restaurants.

Torrisi, for one, has had his fl of making meals like the prix fixe at Torrisi Italian Specialties. "I think that's what's wrong with ne dining. It's part of the stress," he argues. "I think that stymies the magic of the table. It also makes the service staff clear and reset [each place setting] too many times. I want you to be able to enjoy your wine, your food, and not worry about things like that."

Torrisi makes the point that while tasting menus require a high price tag for whatever comes, à la carte menus allow a customer to decide what and how much to order. It's possible to navigate even high-priced menus like the Grill's and the Pool's and spend less per person than for most famous chefs' menus.

In New York, the center of gravity has moved farther and farther downtown, and fewer important restaurants have opened in Midtown, once the center of the city's dining scene. That may be changing, with the Grill and the Pool leading the charge. The new Four Seasons will open nearby next year. Plans for future high-profile projects include one from Joël Robuchon on 53rd Street, another from Eleven Madison Park's Daniel Humm and Will Guidara a bit farther up Park Avenue, and one from Daniel Boulud in the One Vanderbilt skyscraper under construction on East 42nd Street.

The new restaurants in the Seagram Building look to be leaders in many ways. The upstart Major Food Group, with its quirky mixture of creativity and business smarts, may ultimately be remembered for heralding a Midtown New York gastronomic revival.
