Danny Meyer, New York's finest restaurateur

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Before lunch with Danny Meyer, New York's, if not America's most respected restaurateur, at Tabla one of his five restaurants, I watched him make his way across the room greeting regular customers, pumping flesh as effortlessly as any political candidate, but far more sincerely.

An hour later a woman approached our table, shook Meyer by the hand, told him what a good lunch she had just enjoyed and then turned to me exclaiming, 'I don't know what you have done to Danny but I have never ever seen him like this before, sitting looking so relaxed for so long in any of his restaurants.'

One reason for Meyer's frame of mind was that he had just spent the last hour talking about one of his favourite subjects, American restaurants and their immediate future (the others are his wife, their four children and his baseball team, the St Louis Cardinals). And as far as the future is concerned for the industry of which Meyer has become the unofficial spokesman for since he opened the Union Square Cafe in 1985 it is little short of 'discombobulated.'

> 'The biggest change that has taken place over the past 20 years has been the emergence of the fine dining market where many Americans now want to eat not just on special occasions once a year but several times a month for business and pleasure,' Meyer explained. 'We have travelled, learnt and now this is a part of our culture. This sector has grown alongside the two other parts of our eating-out culture which have been there much longer, the casual dining sector, which in the US is epitomised by chains like Red Lobster, and the fast-food sector. Until not so long ago the individual, creative restaurateur, those who know how to stamp out restaurants like a Xerox machine and the merchants of burgers and fries used to co-exist independently and happily. No longer.
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> It is not just a question of the economy or 9/11 but something more fundamental - the bottom has dropped out of the fast food market now that many Americans have decided they want to eat better. Those who were sitting on businesses used to generating billions of dollars and worth millions in real estate have reacted by creating a new market sector, fast casual, and the repercussions for everyone are going to be enormous.'

At this stage a series of small plates and bowls from the Bread Bar menu began to arrive. Meyer had asked his kitchen to choose the dishes, only requesting that they go easy on the onions. Before continuing he did add what a pleasure it was to eat lunch at lunchtime - most restaurateurs normally don't sit down to lunch until 3pm, he explained with a smile.

> 'Take McDonald's for example. Although they are still concentrating on their core market they have invested in about five other companies which will take them into the fast casual sector, most notably their 30 per cent stake in Prèt à Manger, the British ready-made sandwich outlets, which has done very well since its launch over here. And just to highlight how the three sectors, which used to be independent of each other, are now interlocked when Pret wanted a pastry chef to run their central production kitchen they lured my top pastry chef away from Gramercy Tavern. Not that long ago they would never even have come knocking on our door.'

Meyer was not bitter - the only sour note in our conversation was to come later when he took a sidswipe at restaurant critics - but only disarmingly frank. After all, his staff are his biggest asset.

In Meyerland caring for one another is the primary responsibility of his company which now employs over 650. The other four goals are: caring for the customers, the community, their suppliers and last, if not least his investors. And as a result he describes himself not as a CEO or managing director but as a jockey on a thoroughbred. 'My challenge is to know when to let the reins out and expand or pull them in tight,' he added. 'In the restaurant world the rich get richer by attracting and holding on to the best staff. If your restaurant is in the Zagat Top 50 (where Meyer's Union Square Cafe and Gramercy Tavern are rated one and two respectively) then it is more than likely that you will get the cream of the

applicants. But to hold on to them you have to keep on opening to generate head chef and general manager positions for sous chefs and assistant managers. That is what drives me and our openings.'

But the restaurant as a socially responsible entity is another lodestar to which Meyer aspires and inspires his team. We discussed what we were going to eat with Tabla's chef, Floyd Cardoz, who had just returned from LA having cooked the twentieth anniversary charity dinner for Meals on Wheels alongside Wolfgang Puck; every Wednesday one of Meyer's restaurants cooks for a nearby hospice and Meyer himself sits on the boards of Share our Strength, City Harvest and two local development agencies.

In fact, Meyer's most long-lasting contribution to New York may not be the new standards of food, wine and service he has pioneered but the physical regeneration of Madison Square.

> 'Six years ago MetLife, who own the building, approached me with an offer on the space of what is now our two adjacent restaurants, Tabla and Eleven Madison Square, both of which face the square. I spent a year, even before we got down to talking about the lease, creating with their cooperation a public/private partnership which has so far invested over $11 million in regenerating what was once a great part of the city but had been very badly neglected. I would have been foolish not to - after all that park is our front garden, it's the fifth wall of the restaurants. It's smart business to do good.'

It was at this stage of the meal, when I was beginning to relax, that another role reversal took place with Meyer turning to criticise my own profession, the restaurant critics.

> 'What I don't understand is why they don't follow the same approach as wine critics who taste wine and then base their opinions not just on the pleasure it gives today but what it will deliver in the future as well. We build and design our restaurants for the the long term not just because of the size of the investment involved but because, despite all the planning in the world, they take a long time to settle down. For the first three months in a new restaurant I just hold my nose and it is only after a year that I begin to feel safe. Here at Tabla it took three years before I felt really comfortable with what we are doing.'

And all this experience still did not prepare Meyer for the reaction to Blue Smoke, the barbecue restaurant he opened in the spring, an experience he described as 'being smacked in the face with a piece of wood.' Meyer still manages to laugh.

> 'Before we opened I wondered why there was no proper barbecue restaurant in the city and now I know why. Our research was painstaking and immaculate but in retrospect we overlooked three vital factors. Firstly, and most crucially, we had to build a 15-storey extract for the smoker to keep our neighbours happy. This is much, much taller than anything they use in barbecue country and I now realise that the size of the extract substantially affects the cooking process. Secondly, the biggest expat community from the barbecue states [Louisiana, Mississippi, Tennessee and Texas] is right here in New York, all of whom came in immediately we opened, each of them with their own particular idea of just what a barbecued rib should taste like and, of course, ours was different. And, finally, this is the first restaurant I have opened in the age of the Internet. The response was immediate, critical and overwhelming, something we just weren't prepared for.'

Blue Smoke's problems have been solved by various internal incisions in the smokestack, an operation Meyer refers to as a 'metal tracheotomy', which makes the fire feel that it is closer to the outside than it actually is. But this restaurant has also presented Meyer with another opportunity to help others.

'We teamed up with Timberland, the leisurewear company, who supplied the customised T-shirts, workwear and shoes for the restaurant which we are also selling with a donation to Save our Strength. In return, they have adopted Let's Kick Poverty as a logo. Everyone, I hope, will benefit.'

We shook hands on the pavement of a sun-drenched, peaceful Madison Square. Meyer was off to tour his other restaurants before heading to the gym and then back for dinner at Eleven Madison Square when he was going to speak to the board of Timberland about their continued commitment to his cause. I simply cannot imagine them saying No.

Union Square Cafe, 21 E 16th Street, NY (tel 212 243 4020)
Gramercy Tavern, 42 E 20th Street, NY (tel 212 477 0777)
Tabla, 11 Madison Avenue, NY (tel 212 889 0667)
Eleven Madison Park, 11 Madison Avenue, NY (tel 212 889 0905)
Blue Smoke, 116 E 27th Street, NY (tel 212 447 7733)